

Refereed article

Black communities and information workers in search of social justice

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Abstract

The article examines the existence of institutionalised racism in the LIS sector. The author maintains that the profession in Britain is caught in a time warp which prevents any meaningful change to the status quo. He compares British experience with that in the USA. The article goes on to examine ways in which racism can be combated. The concept of Black librarianship – as a concept and work practice – needs to be accepted as part of the solution to racism. Areas for action include empowerment of Black community and library workers. Self-empowering Black staff, and communities need to be part of the real decision-making process in a structured, organised way. There is an urgent need to create more friendly working conditions for Black staff, which in itself can result in improved services to Black communities. It concludes on a positive note by saying that the Government's initiatives in addressing issues of "social exclusion" provide a new framework for the LIS workers to take a strategic approach.

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The struggle for Black[1] librarianship

A matter of social justice in the LIS sector is crying out for solution: institutional racism in information services. The unstated but implied question which goes to the root of the matter is: does institutionalised racism exist in British society in general and in libraries in particular? Following the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report, almost every profession has begun to address the question of institutional racism within its ranks. Thus local authorities, lawyers, the police, trade unions, the National Health Service, housing associations, education, broadcasting, the press – all have begun dialogues to examine their own policies and practices in relation to racism[2]. Among the few professions which has stood in silence is the Library Association – even the Church has now started debating racism. Dooley (1999), for example, says:

The report on the police handling of the murder investigation into the death of Stephen Lawrence has triggered a national debate on racism. While it seems every sector of society has given its views, the churches have kept a deafening silence on the subject.

Dooley thus ends the Church's "deafening silence". What about the libraries? True, voices like that of Khan (1999) have started addressing the issue of institutional racism in the profession in the context of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. But the Library Association – "the most authoritative voice on library and information matters" by its own estimation (LA 1998 Annual Report) – finds nothing to say about racism in the profession. It is satisfied with its Equal Opportunities sub-committee taking whatever limited action it can take, given its limited powers.

This lack of official interest in the association means either that there is no institutional racism in LIS, or that it is so ingrained that it will not even admit to its very existence. The issues of powerless Black LIS workers and

The issue of institutional racism in public libraries cannot be dealt with fully in a short paper such as this. It perhaps needs a number of books to address all the various aspects. This article does not claim to be a comprehensive or historical coverage of the subject. Several other connected issues are covered in a number of related articles by the author. Some of these are listed in the Bibliography and should be read in order to get a fuller picture. The article will have served its purpose if it generates an open debate on institutional racism in public libraries.

their concentration in lower, non-decision making positions is linked to the lack of adequate service to Black communities.

Yet ample evidence exists to indicate that there is a deep-rooted institutional racism in the sector. Cunningham (1996) from the Commission for Racial Equality, says:

In the case of the public authorities mentioned in the examples above, the Health Authority in the case of Mrs Firdous, local authorities, the police, all have equal opportunity statements and policies, all have service standards, yet racial discrimination and disadvantage remain at unacceptably high levels.

Given this scenario it is perhaps not surprising that there is a fear of discrimination and of unequal treatment which puts off ethnic minorities from entering the profession. And I would suggest that it is also discrimination, direct or indirect, which leads to ethnic minorities being found at the lower levels.

Some examples of racism in Britain in general and in the LIS field are given in the author's forthcoming working paper (Durrani, 1999b). Other evidence of the existence of institutionalised racism in the public library field is now easily available. Olden *et al.* (1996) and Roach and Morrison (1998) have done useful work in exploring issues of racism in LIS. Pioneering work by Black and Ethnic Minority Workers Group (BWG), Hackney, with its report to DNH, numerous articles in *Hackney Libraries News* and minutes of its meetings all provide perhaps the only written documentation of institutional racism in local authorities in Britain.

This is not to say that no attempts have been made to make the association address the issue of institutional racism in the profession. As a result of the pressure from a few committed individuals, the Equal Opportunities Sub-committee of the association did some pioneering work in mid 1990. Out of this emerged the annual "Black Contribution to British Librarianship" conferences, the fourth one being planned for November 1999, which is expected to discuss issues raised by the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report. Yet this annual event seems to have become a substitute for admitting that there is institutional racism, let alone taking any real action to eliminate it. Thus the status quo is quietly maintained and the Black voice remains powerless and outside the "mainstream" of the citadel of professional power. It seems enough to the association that Black LIS workers are

allowed to come together once a year under the elegant roof of the association, have their cry about their lot in the profession and go back to the factory floor for another year of silence. Meanwhile the association can go back to its "normal" work. This contrasts with the powerful voice that the Black librarians have in the USA. For example, "ALA has provided very good training sessions on cultural diversity at its conferences, and has a Spectrum scholarship programme which encourages cultural diversity among ILS students" according to observers familiar with the USA scene.

Again, there was a motion at the annual general meeting of the association in 1996 trying to make the association take some action to address the question of race. The Motion read:

Motion 8

Issues of race and class are as relevant and important to the library community as they are to society at large. A well-attended meeting of Black library workers held at the LA in April revealed that the Association needs to be proactive in its recruitment of these workers and that those who are already members should be encouraged to be more involved in LA activities. We therefore call upon this AGM to recommend to Council:

- (1) that the LA establishes a formal Black Library Workers Group, which will have the same status (capitation, Council members, etc, as other LA groups);
- (2) that the LA organises an annual conference for Black Library Workers;
- (3) that the Black Library Workers Group is allocated a regular column in the Library Association Record or quarterly supplement to the LAR. The contents of this column/supplement will be edited by the Equal Opportunities Sub-Committee (*Library Association Record*, 1996).

Nothing concrete emerged from the motion and the association was happy to make promises for future action which it has never addressed. Disappointed at the lack of concern of the association, a few members sought to follow the official path to forming a Black workers group similar to other LA groups. This again ended in failure as bureaucratic rules stipulated that 100 paid-up members sign a petition. This was indeed a Catch 22 situation as the association has never attracted many Black members among its 23,000 personal UK members. There does not seem to be 100 white members concerned enough to sign such a petition.

Trade unions and racism

The trade union movement has recognised the all pervasive nature of racism in British society. It has also identified how its existence is often denied. *Tackling Racism* (1989) emphasises the fact that racism and its solution are not issues for Black people only:

Racism affects all workers, and we must all oppose it. Black workers suffer in several ways – from unfair treatment at work to verbal abuse, and physical attacks . . . It is still possible to hear comments that “Racism isn’t our problem – . . . there are no blacks around here . . . At best, this ignores the deep roots that prejudice has laid in British culture. Often it is an excuse for turning away from real problems of discrimination.

Hackney’s Black Workers Group also raises the question of whether racism exists in the library service (*Hackney Libraries News*, 1993):

What is essential in this ongoing struggle is that we do not take an ostrich-like attitude and pretend that there is no racism in the library service. This attitude objectively serves those who advocate racism. It is better to admit that racism exists in library service – as it does in the society outside the library. There is no shame in admitting a truth. It is in fact wrong not to admit it. Once its existence is admitted ways can then be found to combat it.

Discussions by the present author with Black library workers from many other library authorities (in London as well as from other parts of the country) indicate that the problems created by racism are a common experience for LIS workers. Indeed, it was this feeling that brought together a number of library workers in 1996. They began to put pressure on the Library Association to form a Black workers group. The feeling was (and still is) that only a self-organised Black workers group can articulate problems of racism and recommend and put into practice action to combat racism. It is only such a group that can give support to Black workers to raise issues of unfair practices and unequal resource allocation. Unfortunately, the association has not yet seen the need for such a group. Nor do Black library workers or communities in Britain have the economic or political power to make their agenda a “mainstream” agenda.

There are many library workers and managers who claim to be “colour-blind” and see no institutionalised racism in the library world. This has been quoted, for example, by

a senior (white) manager in 1996 to the author as a justification for not taking action on cases of racism reported by Black workers. This is not an isolated case. It is also exposed in the Government’s response to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry:

The “colour blind” approach, favoured by local authorities whose populations are mainly white, is no longer acceptable as it ignores racism and will not deliver an anti-racist society in which racial and cultural diversity is embraced. (*The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Home Secretary’s Action Plan*, 1999).

Such managers see institutionalised and individual acts of racism as results of “poor management” or “poor communication”. Black staff who struggle against racism in various ways are often condemned as “emotional”, “lazy”, and accused of “using the race card”. Victims of racism are condemned as liars because they cannot produce evidence of existence of institutionalised racism, when by its very nature racism is hidden and operates at an underground level. The onus is always on the victims of racism to produce proof of racism, never on those perpetrating racism to produce proofs of their “non-racism”. Asking victims of racism to prove the existence of racism is victimising the victim.

Again, *Hackney Libraries News* (1993) says:

And yet racism persists. One reason for this is the lip service paid to eliminating racism by middle and lower level managers. It does not take long to see through the empty mouthing of anti-racist rhetoric from some managers while they tolerate or even practice racism – however cleverly covered up in correct “professional” and local government jargon. Often such managers avoid taking actions against racism by turning the whole situation on its head by asking the victims of racism to prove the existence of racism. The victim becomes the accused and the trial judges are the very racist managers themselves. No wonder racism is so difficult to eliminate!

Allegations of racism are dealt with differently by different managers and in different workplaces. This results in having double standards in management practices, one for white staff and one for Black staff. This was raised, for example, at the Black Librarians’ meeting organised by the Equal Opportunities Sub-Committee of the Library Association. Black workers who raise the question of workplace racism are subject to extreme pressures. This is mentioned in *Hackney Libraries News* (1993):

The existence of double standards in everyday work: mistakes by white staff are quickly

forgiven, those by black ones result in severe punishment. Black staff need to be super efficient, white ones can get by with mediocrity. Black qualified staff remain on lower grades for ever or they resign in disgust. White ones find it easier to move up, although there are a few “unfavoured” ones who have joined their black colleagues at the bottom of the heap. These “unfavoured” ones are often the articulate, the class conscious or strong union supporters – in other words “troublemakers”.

And again:

... One has only to attend a meeting of B&EM Workers Group to realise that racism exists in very subtle forms. Individuals who are victims of it bear it in silence as it does not seem worth the heavy sacrifice to oppose it ... Those who dare raise questions about these issues are branded as troublemakers and the rumour mills are busy finding the slightest occasion to condemn them as inefficient and useless. The constant personal attacks make it difficult for even the most determined to continue to seek justice.

It is convenient and less stressful for (racist) managers to ignore the problems created by racism than to admit it exists and then be forced to take action against colleagues and friends in order to eliminate racism.

Roach and Morrison (1998) have done much valuable service in combating racism in the library world by their research. It is now possible for Black and progressive White workers to give proof that there is racism in the library world. Thus, for example, one of the findings of Roach and Morrison is:

Ethnic minorities are under-represented amongst staff within the public library service and there are few opportunities for ethnic minority citizens to influence service provision. The current uncertainties about, and potential demise of, special funding regimes such as the Home Office Section 11 programme could further weaken the link between public libraries and ethnic minorities.

Managers need to explain why this situation arose in the first place and what action they aim to take to change the situation. One hopes the DCMS will examine annual library plans from all libraries for answers to these questions and ensure that authorities are taking action to change the situation.

As a society, we seem reluctant to admit the existence of institutionalised racism. As Pallister (1998) shows, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Paul Condon, provides a good example of one establishment's reluctance to admit existence of racism. He bends over backwards to deny its very existence even when confronted by bookloads of evidence.

Unless there is a theoretical recognition of the existence of institutionalised racism in British society, there is no serious way in which we can combat racism in practice. Thus the first step in eliminating racism is to recognise its existence. In the final analysis, racism is a denial of basic human rights.

Judging by what Black librarians had to say publicly and at private sessions at the first meeting organised by the Equal Opportunities Sub-committee of the Library Association in 1996, racism exists in almost every LIS workplace. One has only to attend any meeting of Black workers to realise that racism exists in very subtle forms. Racism is overt and covert. Many Black workers talk about an atmosphere of oppression which makes it difficult for them to raise issues. Individuals who are victims of it bear it in silence as it does not seem worth the heavy sacrifice to oppose it. Hence the lack of documented evidence of racism. It seems that the only documented cases of racism are the output from Hackney's Black Workers Group. Perhaps there are no others, suggest some people. Roach and Morrison's (1998) research as well as the review by Olden *et al.* (1996) suggest otherwise.

Once the existence of institutionalised racism is accepted, many possible ways of combating it can be explored. It is necessary to practice what can be called “Black librarianship” in order to eliminate racism. But this will immediately give rise to the question “Does Black librarianship exist?” The wide range of issues raised by Olden *et al.* (1996) poses fundamental questions about the LIS profession as a whole. If the social and professional issues raised are ever to be addressed seriously and resolved, then the concept of Black librarianship itself needs to be recognised as a way of providing solutions. Reforming a basically Euro-centric library system by “bolting-on” some marginal policies to address race discrimination will not solve the basic problems. Nor will a token service to Black communities address their real information needs. A new concept and vision of service to Black communities is the only way of providing a relevant service to the dispossessed and excluded communities. Hackney Libraries took the appropriate step by producing *Vision Statement on Services to Black and Minority Ethnic Communities* (1996), perhaps the first such vision in Britain.

The lack of recognition of the need for special library practices to address problems of racism (broadly described as Black librarianship) is related to the lack of recognition of racism itself and an absence of the will to eliminate racism. The one is dependent on the other. By accepting the existence of Black librarianship, one implicitly accepts the existence of racism. Thus the first step in resolving the problems of lack of service to Black communities and the poor working environment for Black librarians is to accept the concept of Black librarianship, which can then become one of the tools of combating racism in libraries.

The two aspects of Black librarianship – service to Black communities and the work environment – are areas that require more attention from policy makers, library management and workers. Better community and outreach services address issues related to the economic, cultural and social needs of Black people. Improving work environment for Black staff involves improving job and career prospects and ensuring fair work practices. Empowering Black staff and communities to be part of the real decision-making process in a structured, organised way, and generally creating a more friendly working conditions for Black staff can result in improving services to Black communities.

There was a time when Britain was considered by some to be the “best” public library service in the world. It was on the basis of such belief that the library practices used by workers and peasants in Kenya for generations was replaced by the “colonial” model. Some aspects of this successful practice are given in Durrani (1979). The colonial model of public library was exported to all the colonies by the British Council as the “universal” – and the only possible – way of providing library service – it allowed for no challenge to its monopoly. After independence, librarians in many former colonies have had to struggle to remove the worst aspects of the “British” system in order to make their libraries more relevant to their own communities. The short-lived *University of Nairobi Library Magazine* (1982–84) provides evidence of the damage done by the export of the “British” library system to Kenya, together with fresh ideas from local library workers to set up a service considered relevant to Kenyan needs. But here in Britain we seem to have been caught in a time warp which prevents any meaningful change to the

status quo. Although various “community librarianship” practices have helped to provide fresh ideas on services to Black communities, such practices fell victim to the Thatcher government’s relentless attacks on services to communities.

Black communities and their information needs

It is necessary to examine the different Black communities and to understand their particular information needs. What, for example, prevents them making full use of the traditional library which, in theory at least, has all the information that its local community needs?

To begin with, let us understand what we mean by the term “Black communities”. Note that we are talking about Black communities, not community. Britain’s heritage of its empire days and its long history of imperialism and exploitation has resulted in a large number of people from around the world settling in Britain. They come either on specific invitation to fill jobs which local workers were not able or willing to undertake; or the repression unleashed by regimes kept in power by the West for economic or strategic reasons in the Majority World meant that people had to flee to Europe to escape life threatening forces. It is the exploitation by the West of the rest of the world that creates conditions for mass migration of labour to Europe. Such exploitation and world poverty is described in some detail by Chomsky (1999), which should be read by anybody who wants to understand racism.

Each community coming to Britain came with its own specific economic, cultural, social and political lifestyles. These include people from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Recent immigration includes people from Europe as well. It is true to say that they have many differences and contradictions within their own ranks. But the institutionalised racism they face ensures that they are all victims of a system which happily exploits their labour, capital and entrepreneurial skills but does not recognise their economic, political and cultural rights. It is this common fact of economic exploitation and social oppression that gives unity to these communities. They face the same forces of institutionalised racism and it is their unity in their common struggle which will help find a

solution to their oppression and help create a fairer society in Britain.

These communities therefore do not have the same informational and educational needs as the white ethnic population. They need information about their rights in Britain, about the ways of combating the daily racism they face in housing, schools, workplaces and down the streets. They need to catch up with the technological levels made possible by the immense exploitation of the Majority World. They want to be able to keep up with developments in their home countries, in their own languages. They want to be able to keep their culture alive, to teach their children facts about their economic and political reality which forces them to flee to a cold country – cold both in terms of the climate as well as the reception they receive from the majority of people they meet.

Public libraries as a free and “neutral” service have the potential to respond to their informational, educational, and cultural needs. But what do most Black people find in their local libraries? Hostile or at best indifferent faces, unhelpful images, irrelevant content and what was to them foreign customs and practices far removed from the friendly and co-operative environments they came from. This has been reported in innumerable meetings with members of the South Asian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Turkish and Kurdish communities in Hackney throughout the author’s work there between 1986 to 1998 – although much progress was made in later years (for details see Durrani *et al.*, 1999). The British public library system has largely been providing services for its white resident community whose needs were far removed from those of the new arrivals as well as those of Black British people. No standards exist for providing a guaranteed level of service to Black communities in any library in Britain. This was one of the recommendations made by Hackney’s Black Workers Group in their submission to the Department of National Heritage (*Library Services for Black and Ethnic Minority Nationalities in the UK; A Report Prepared for the DNH Review of Public Libraries* (1994):

We need to go beyond the present “Equal Opportunities” policies and work on a new “national” vision and a strategic approach and framework. Standards of service for BEM communities must be set up, with procedures for monitoring their implementation.

At present specific services to BEM nationalities are not legally binding on the library

authorities. We recommend that these be incorporated into the Public Libraries and Museums Act.

As specified in the Public Library and Museum Act of 1964, public libraries must provide a “comprehensive” and “efficient” service and meet the “general” and “special requirements” of both adults and children, and “encourage” and “advise” all sectors to make “full use” of the Library Service. Yet public libraries are traditionally structured to meet only the “mainstream” needs of the indigenous population. We do not believe they make a serious attempt to research and analyse the real needs of their local BEM nationalities. There should be appropriate outreach as part of a serious effort to meet these needs so as to overcome discriminatory policies, procedures, attitudes and practices. Unless and until we do this, we are merely paying lip service to “Equal Opportunities” policies.

Service to BEM nationalities as well as stock funding and outreach activities to BEM nationalities should be well planned in annual and five-year plans. Performance indicators should be set up and be monitored throughout the year.

The majority of libraries see no need to change their traditional system as the new Black communities did not have sufficient economic and political clout to force a change in local services. An analysis of the first year of Annual Library Plans indicates that most authorities achieved poor results in issues surrounding “social exclusion” which incorporates exclusion based on race. Black librarians at the meeting organised by the Equal Opportunity Sub-committee lamented the lack of resources available for Black material. Even when the so-called “outreach” services such as housebound services existed, the chances were that they concentrated on services to non-Black communities.

One example of how the library service has failed many potential Black women users is by insisting on two documentary proofs of residence with address. This requirement is easy to meet for property-owning or renting people, especially among white communities. It is certainly not possible for many working class Black women who own or rent no property in their own names to be able to provide such proofs of addresses: they hold no driving licences, no bank accounts, no properties, and no utility bills come on their names. Such property relations are entered into by men, and many Black women have no independent “economic lives”. The response of many library authorities is to ignore such “problems”. It is not “their” problem. And the problem for the woman who speaks only

in her nationality language is even worse. It is not surprising that far from decreasing “social exclusion”, the library service often helps to keep these women – and their children – even more excluded. Yet the profession does not want to accept such an unhelpful set of rules as aspects of institutionalised racism.

However, where Black communities have gained economic or numeral strength, such as in Tower Hamlets in London or in the Midlands, the local services have had to make changes. Birmingham, for instance has perhaps the only comprehensive reference library in Britain; Birmingham boasts a Library of Asian Languages, Manchester’s Chinese Library and Information Service has attracted national attention; Tower Hamlets libraries have sizeable collections in the Bengali language. But there is no national strategy to meet the needs of Black communities. Roach and Morrison (1998) conclude, “There is little evidence that libraries have developed effective strategic programmes in response to ethnic diversity” (p. 167).

Even the provision of special funding under Section 11 resulted in bolting services to Black communities onto the “mainstream” white services and as these funds dried up, so did the bolted-on services. Many people have been unhappy with the whole concept and outcomes of the Section 11 funding as a way of improving services to Black people. John Vincent (1999), for instance, says:

I’ve always been critical of Section 11 as, whilst it delivered some resources, it also allowed libraries to marginalise services to BME communities. Also, it encouraged short-termism, in terms of planning and staffing services, and as a part of this, allowed libraries to employ, for example, Library Assistants to carry out stock selection and other such duties without paying them properly for these services.

It is not within the scope of this paper to examine, in great detail, library needs of Black communities today, but some examples can show the long way that public library services will need to move if they are to meet the real needs of Black communities. Olden *et al.* (1996, p. 10) provide a useful summary from literature about how the African-Caribbean people fit (or not) “into the mainstream” and how they see public library service. The need of course is to include the African Caribbean community as part of “the mainstream”, not something outside it. Examples from Nottingham and Avon show similar patterns as those in London:

West Indian immigrants were not welcomed into mainstream British society on arrival, according to Alexander (1982). They set up self-help groups and other alternative institutions. Given the “actual second class status” (p. 9) of black and Asian citizens she says it is not surprising that some of the younger generations rebel. Black communities do not have high expectations of libraries, she adds, because they are seen to serve the needs of the white majority and are associated with Anglo-Saxon culture and notions of superiority. A 1980 Nottinghamshire report stated that it was well-known that members of the Afro-Caribbean community made little use of libraries there (*Library Services to the Ethnic Minorities in Nottinghamshire*, 1980). A more recent report from Avon states that black and Asian people are aware of libraries, but feel alienated from what they see as middle-class institutions catering for the white majority (*Library services to minority ethnic groups*, 1990).

Discussing the Chinese community, Olden *et al.* (1996, p. 11) say that the “community is spread throughout Britain, although London is the largest centre, followed by Manchester . . . Sunday is the recreational, shopping and general business day, but one on which the public libraries are closed.” Sunday openings may be offensive to some religious groups, but this has not prevented major shops opening; nor should such “offence” prevent a full service to communities whose needs may otherwise remain unmet. Olden goes on to explain the Chinese communities’ use of libraries:

Up to 75 percent of the first generation are unable to speak English (Ng, 1989). As a consequence they tend not to express their need in public, either to local councils or public libraries. They are often in ignorance of British law and their welfare rights. They try to solve problems on their own, with their immediate family with whom ties are close, or with friends from within the tightly knit circle. The concept of a public library service is foreign to most, and they expect to buy reading material for themselves.

Ng found that in places where only small numbers live the public library authorities do not always fulfil their responsibility of meeting their needs. Of those surveyed, 60 percent had never visited public libraries. Where local libraries did stock Chinese language material many Chinese readers were unaware of it.

It is then clear that a library service that claims to address the needs of all its actual and potential users needs to be proactive in seeking out their potential users. Developments to date do not provide evidence that this has happened in a systematic or organised way.

Change will only come when there are enough Black librarians in position of power at local and national level. Those who wield power in the profession also control finances, research grants and make policies. It is a sad fact of the British society in the late 1990s that there are few, if any, Black librarians among this élite. A quick survey of heads of public libraries – for example at the Association of London Chief Librarians – and of a meeting of the Library Association's Council will again show the lack of Black faces. Indeed many progressive white librarians feel equally concerned about this lack of fairness in the profession, yet are powerless to change the situation.

The unequal relations of power within the profession ensure that a so-called neutral position is taken on social, cultural and political issues, which are then dismissed as not being relevant to the needs of the "profession" which is supposed to be above such "unprofessional" matters. Far from ensuring neutrality, the view that the profession does not need to get involved in "politics" has in fact helped to serve the interest of one race and one class against the needs of others. Such views have made the profession seem irrelevant to those whose needs have largely been ignored.

Many members of Black communities and Black information workers feel that the library profession has failed to meet its own fundamental requirement: that libraries should first serve its users. Yes, they serve – but only insofar as the population is mainly white and petty bourgeois. When it comes to Black people, or working classes, this maxim seems not to be important. They are not considered a library's "natural users". Token service is considered good enough for them, especially if there are no organised protests from the community. Examples of how Black library workers see the profession's failure to meet the needs of Black communities are found in *Hackney Libraries News* (1993):

- Asian music is not purchased on the grounds that there is no demand for it. No statistical evidence is considered necessary. When challenged, it is claimed that Asian music is so cheap that everybody can afford to buy the cassettes and hence the library does not need to provide them. This is perhaps the most blatant racist argument in denying Asian people adequate material.

- False arguments are made that there is no demand for black material when no efforts are made to promote the material. The racist implication behind these arguments is that Black people are not interested in reading, which is considered alien to their culture. It is conveniently forgotten that writing was invented by Black people, that the largest publishers in the world today are in the "South".
- "Professional" arguments are used to justify why no black material is purchased. These include racist ones which say their catchment does not include Black users.
- Senior managers have advocated the establishment of "White Fund" to counter Black & Ethnic Minority Fund. They betray their total ignorance of the concepts and reality of social oppression and economic exploitation in our society. Nor have they understood the equal opportunity policies. One wonders how such managers reached their managerial positions.

Winston (1996) provides a similar view from the USA:

Diversity as a value is quite a bit easier to articulate than it is to put into practice or make a priority in the minds of librarians and staff. What has become apparent to me is not everyone who voices support for diversity is equally committed to making the day-to-day decisions (and sacrifices) needed to institutionalize diversity and to create an environment conducive to the success of minority staff and patrons. Daily decisions relating to the development of job announcements, recruitment, hiring, treatment of colleagues, and the development of innovative programs provide an opportunity to put verbalised commitment into practice. This is the area in which I was most frequently disappointed. Many of my colleagues expressed support for diversity in open forums. However, not all of these colleagues were equally supportive when difficult decisions had to be made (p. 394).

Some White petty bourgeois groups can be extremely articulate in demanding – and getting – the lion's share of library resources at the expense of Black communities, and working class as a whole. They are well connected to local or national political forces in power. They sometimes monopolise the use of valuable library exhibition space, meeting halls, or office space. It is very difficult to change the usage in order to allow "excluded" communities the same facilities. This is confirmed by Roach and Morrison (1998):

The principles of "universality" as expressed in the Public Libraries and Museums Act of 1964,

rather than enabling, actually defeats equality by imposing a standard based on the needs of the most powerful or influential groups whilst failing to recognise needs of less powerful or influential groups. In this way it has been possible for individual public library services to promote access for all whilst continuing to deliver, at best, colour blind (or, at worst, ethnically biased) service provision (p. 165).

Black communities and librarians have not yet established an equivalent power base. They have, however, struggled for a long time to ensure that the library service as a whole recognises that there are special needs of Black communities which the “traditional libraries” do not meet. They have also struggled to have one basic fact accepted outside the Black community: that it is the existence of institutionalised racism in the library field that has prevented the full delivery of basic information services to Black communities.

Resistance to racism

It is not only the issues of Black library service that are ignored overall. The existence of resistance to racism in the LIS field has also been similarly ignored by library educators and “mainstream” publications. It is true that in every workplace where there is racism, there is inevitably resistance to it – however open or underground it may be. For those seeking proof of this, I would recommend a visit to any workplace where there are Black information workers – but such resistance will become obvious only to those sympathetic to the cause.

Again, it is in the interest of the those in power to ignore or play down the existence of such resistance. It is very seldom that one hears of resistance to racism in LIS. The resistance of Black communities and librarians to institutionalised racism is hardly recognised, let alone being used as an example of how to combat racism. It is ironic that a profession devoted to free flow of information itself practices censorship of information and does it so efficiently. A number of attempts to have regular supplements on issues of interest to Black librarians and communities in issues of *Library Association Record* have met with firm rejections, once again revealing the power position within the professional body. See, for example, the motion at the 1996 AGM of the association

asking for “a regular column in the *Record*” or a quarterly supplement to the *LAR* devoted to issues of Black library service (*Library Association Record*, 1996, p. 9). With the obvious defeat of the motion, the matter is closed as far as the association is concerned. This was an important occasion to take action on racism, before the *Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report*. Similarly, the Roach and Morrison (1998) recommendations have not received the national acceptance they deserve.

Olden *et al.* (1996) are right in saying that important developments at practical levels do not get reported in professional journals, as the real practitioners who are charting new paths are too busy to document new developments. This is particularly true for Black LIS workers, especially at middle and “higher” levels, who have to carry not only the burden of heavy workloads, but also have to engage in a constant battle with different aspects of institutionalised racism which attack them from all sides. They either receive no support from their senior managers or face even more attacks from such managers, who hide their racism under pseudo-professional jargons and insulting insinuations. Thus no support exists for these Black LIS staff who carry yet another burden of providing, often in their own time, a sympathetic counselling and support service – professional, social, emotional – to other Black workers who happen to be even less fortunate than themselves and are even bigger victims of racist practices at work and who cannot turn to the white fraternity for support or sympathy. These heavy demands on the time and emotional energy of Black LIS staff leave them little time to document important developments and practices they are helping to set up – even if there were journals ready to publish such achievements.

Among the tools used to suppress the resistance of Black librarians is the extremely hostile work environment which has left the Black librarian isolated – culturally, socially, ideologically and often physically – in the workplace. Even when Black staff make up a majority of staff, they are usually at the lowest level. Thus the decision-making process is controlled by a well-knit white petty-bourgeois leadership (male and female) which claims to be “colour blind” – in effect not wanting to understand racism, let alone trying to combat it. This élite controls the prevailing work policies and practices and buys out the

loyalty of middle and lower levels of management (who are often racist themselves anyway) by means of small favours and as a result of a perceived common interest. These facts are well documented, for instance in the minutes of Hackney's Black Workers Group, their articles in *Hackney Libraries News* as well as points raised by Black librarians at the meetings organised by the Equal Opportunities Sub-committee of the Library Association.

At the same time, this élite cleverly manipulates Black staff, especially where strong, united Black workers groups have emerged. They have encouraged every possible division within the Black organisations, to magnify minor, internal differences and to find allies among them. Alas, sections of Black workforce fall easy victim to such manoeuvring – worried as they are by redeployment and job losses. The “divide-and-rule” tactics used in colonial times is still with us today – but in the “mother country” this time.

Individual Black staff who challenge racist practices find themselves victims of vicious rumours, isolation, and often find themselves down-graded or redeployed or made redundant at the next available restructuring. This happened on a massive scale with the changes in Section 11 funding; it is currently going on at a less spectacular level, but even more effectively as a part of the budget cuts exercise in many local authorities.

The above “claims” remain unsupported by references, proofs and evidence in an article such as this one. The provision of evidence, concrete cases with names, dates and record of incidents can become possible only in the context of a formal enquiry. But this inability to provide evidence does not imply that racist practices do not exist. Black library workers need no substantiating them, for they are facts of everyday life for them. Articles in the internal *Hackney Library News* (1993), Olden *et al.* (1996), and Roach and Morrison (1998) provide a glimpse of what the reality is for majority of Black LIS workers. It is a pointer to the real power situation in LIS today that one cannot even start addressing issues of institutionalised racism without convincing a rather reluctant white establishment of its very existence.

The full history of the struggle of the Black communities and of the Black librarians for a relevant library and information service has yet to be written. Olden's book has done a

great service in documenting important issues of racism and in bringing them to the surface. At the same time, it points to the need for more extensive and intensive research to be done. It is important not only to document the actual operation of unfair practices but also to develop and implement appropriate policies to overcome racism, overt and covert, in the LIS. CRE and Roach and Morrison (1998) have provided not only evidence of the problem but possible solutions.

Suffering from the glass ceiling

The situation in the USA is perhaps not so different in terms of the struggle that Black communities and librarians have to wage in Britain. A recent publication from the USA documents the struggle for equality waged by American librarians of colour. Abif (1996) explains the current situation:

Discussions have been taking place since the 1960s regarding the recruitment and retention of librarians of color. The past ten years has seen no real change. Our mentors have been working on this problem for many years, nevertheless, librarians of color have made very few gains. Librarians of color still suffer from the glass ceiling and are very slow in gaining promotions to upper management in librarianship. There are only a handful of Afrikan Americans who direct ARL (Association of Research Libraries) libraries and approximately a half dozen who direct major public libraries in this country.

Yet in one sense at least, Black librarians in the USA have made more progress than those in Britain. They are better organised (e.g. they have formed a powerful Black Caucus within the American Library Association); more of them are getting higher level jobs, and they seem to have some control over the publishing field and manage to get into print their struggles “in their own voices”. Black British librarians have not yet made any progress in controlling or being able to use the established professional journals, nor to publish their own books or have any control in the publishing field. If they are to articulate their struggles effectively, and indeed to form a unified front to combat racism, they will have to pay attention to the publishing field. In the final analysis, racism can only be defeated by uniting all anti-racist forces – black and white. This can be achieved only on the basis of regular and systematic exchange of views and

practices to forge a common strategy. A dedicated press is essential for this. Any resistance movement which ignores this fact does so at its peril. Developments in information and communications technology offer new opportunities which need to be grabbed by those seeking a way out of “social exclusion”.

A question often asked is “what role do those Black managers who have risen to middle (and senior?) levels play in combating racism?” Some have been so oppressed by the racist culture that they side with (racist) managers and go out of their way to show how “colour-blind” and “raceless” they are. “Token” Black librarians come from this group. Such managers are no role models for Black people, and they usually do more damage to the cause of anti-racism and social justice. This is again well documented in the pages of *Hackney Libraries News* (1993):

The existence of what Fanon called “Black Skins White Masks” are called “Coconuts” in common language – those who are black in colour but support “white” culture of oppression. Racism in reality is a political and social issue. Many people in Africa, for example, were initially happy at the time of independence at seeing blacks in power. It did not take them long to realise that being oppressed by black ruling class is as painful as being oppressed by white ruling class. The question to be answered is – on whose behalf does the ruling class rule – on behalf of the masses of working people or in the interest of a small petty-bourgeois elite supported by foreign imperialist interests?

Similarly the greatest damage to black people is done by those black people, particularly at managerial level, who themselves oppress other blacks, but hide their oppression under the umbrella of being black. They take advantage of the sacrifice of those blacks who struggle against oppression and suffer. They gain promotions and enjoy the general patronage of the white system. They actively betray the black cause, for example, by acting as the eyes and ears of the racist establishment which then uses this information to attack black leaders and organisation to make them ineffective. It is not an accident that the black struggle of the last decades has focused in the exposure of such “coconuts” who have proved the most difficult stumbling block to progress. Needless to say, those propagating racism find “coconuts” useful tools in their dirty tools bag.

Of the others, there are many who live an existence of daily tension and struggle, not only to survive in a hostile, racist environment but also take on the burden of attacking every

aspect of racism around them. But the records of their anti-racist struggles go largely unrecorded and often unrecognised. Instead of getting support from their bosses, they may find their path blocked by attempts to show them up as “poor managers”, “unreliable”, “wasting too much time on petty projects” etc. Needless to say, their career prospects are often made to appear “non-existent”. While they are under attack, incompetent managers – White and Black – whose only merit is not to challenge racism, are praised for their “good work”, their shortcomings are covered up and they are lined up for promotions.

This is not to say that all workplaces are racist for Black managers. No doubt there are places where Black managers are valued and supported. But such positive examples are in a minority given the fact that there are a very few senior Black managers in the first place. Nevertheless, these cases go to show what potential there is for all competent and committed people – White and Black – to work together.

Another insulting behaviour towards Black librarians is not to consider them competent in any aspect of library work, except in “Black issues”. They may be excellent cataloguers, have much knowledge in reference work, but these specialisms are often denied them in favour of routine tasks that require minimum skills and experience. Among “lower” levels, it is the Black library workers who often get the tasks of shelving and shelf-tidying Black books as if they cannot be trusted with “mainstream” books – as if White staff would be better deployed looking after “their” books. No research exists to see what damage is done to service delivery and what harmful effects such practices have on personal esteem among Black staff. This issue is raised by a number of contributors in the excellent US publication which reflects the experience of Black librarians in Britain too (Neely and Abif, 1996). For example, Mark Winston (1996, p. 394) says, “One interesting aspect of diversity is the lack of respect for the knowledge of the minority librarian.”

This is one of the worst aspects of racism in the workplace. Such librarians are thus denied recognition of their professional competence and experience. As a nation, we lose out on the valuable contribution that these highly intelligent and hard working librarians can make. Instead they end up

losing self esteem and confidence in their own abilities.

Some things will never change ...?

“Some things will never change” says Flowers (1996):

It was obvious that racism played a key role in the office politics that surrounded me on a daily basis. I finally came to the realisation that this was a norm in the library as well as other environments when African Americans strive to achieve. The bottom line – some things will never change.

The situation is no different in British libraries. It does not take long for a group of Black librarians meeting for the first time to establish deep sympathy and understanding with each other on the basis of an exchange of common experiences of racism at workplaces. But their discussions, experiences and solutions are not part of the “mainstream” issues of “professional” concern. Whenever such “ugly” topics of racism at workplaces arise at “polite” meetings, there are embarrassed silences all around and it is subtly made clear to the unfortunate victim of racism that their problems are not due to racism but are really a result of their own personal and professional shortcomings. In any case, it is made very clear, such issues should not be aired in public.

Victims of oppression end up either giving up this unequal struggle against racism or getting diverted into “sideline” issues that give the appearance of continuing the struggle. This is the only way some people can survive a hostile environment. Others merely get sucked into supporting or not opposing the status quo actively. Yet others are encouraged to end up in damaging in-fighting with others within the Black struggle and objectively end up supporting the racist establishment.

They who hold the stick ...

It is the lack of Black LIS workers in senior management and decision-making posts that has distorted library services to Black communities and provided poor work environment for Black staff. The lack of Black staff at senior decision-making levels means that all policies and practices of relevance to Black communities have to be sanctioned by

white managers. A well-known Hindi folk song says,

they who hold the stick
will walk away with the bull

In LIS, it is the White, middle class that holds the stick which is used to marginalise Black and working class people and their information, education, and cultural services. It is in this relation of power that Black librarians and communities have lost out. Until there is genuine equality in this power relationship, there will not be a relevant library service for Black people.

What then are prospects for a non-racist library service? An indication of how the needs of Black people are considered officially is provided in the “largest piece of research into public libraries ever undertaken in the world” as the *DNH Review of the Public Library Service in England and Wales* (1995) describes itself. Olden *et al.* (1996, p. 29) point out, “Black and ethnic minority/multi-cultural provision is not treated at length” in the Review. Hackney Library’s Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) Workers Group, in its report, *Library Services for Black and Ethnic Minority Nationalities in the UK* (1994), makes the following comment on the draft report:

It is very disappointing and disheartening that the Draft DNH Report by ASLIB Consultancy has not included any evidence of special research/survey nor special recommendations for improving public library services to Black and Ethnic Minority (BEM) Nationalities. By this omission, the ASLIB Report assumes that the British society is homogeneous. It is therefore indirectly discriminatory to providing services to BEM nationalities.

Hackney Library’s Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) Workers Group provided a 20-page detailed report with recommendations on improving services to Black communities. It gave specific recommendations on staffing, funding, service delivery (including outreach, community links, promotion), education and training, and new technology. However the final DNH Report totally ignored the Hackney Library’s BME Workers Group’s recommendations, not even acknowledging its existence – hardly a good practice to make the Black communities “included” as part of the “mainstream”.

One hopes the new Labour government’s concern with “social exclusion” will enable some of these issues to be considered favourably. There are already many positive

signs. For example, all authorities are expected to record their work towards “social inclusion” in their Annual Library Plans. The commitment of the Government towards preparing policies that address issues of social exclusion was shown when “In the autumn of 1998 the British Library Research and Innovation Centre and the Library and Information Commission jointly agreed to fund research exploring the role of the UK public library in combating social exclusion. The overall aim of the project is to investigate the potential value and impact of the public library in overcoming social exclusion. It is planned that the research will be completed by summer 2000, when a final project report and policy briefings and guidelines will be produced” (Public Library Policy and Social Exclusion).

But one important lesson to be learnt by Black librarians is that of “self-empowerment”. As Prime (1998) says:

One of the things that I think is the biggest croak about empowerment is the idea that anybody can empower us; you have to be self-empowered. The problem is to wait for, (1) “my boss” (2) “my bosses’ boss” (3) the structure (4) the institution, etc. and you’d be waiting until 2050 and nothing happens. You have to be self-empowered.

Until this process of self-empowerment takes place among Black communities and Black library workers, there is little hope for any real, meaningful change.

At the same time, those struggling against racism need to learn a few lessons. It is important to relate the struggles within libraries to two important struggles outside the library: the anti-racist struggle in the society outside, and to the class struggle within a capitalist society. Pateman (1999) provides a well-researched discussion on the issue of classes in libraries. But these are taboo subjects in a “pure profession” such as librarianship. For those who take anti-racism, and struggle against exploitation and oppression seriously, there is only one way ahead: librarians need to be active participants in the social and class struggles in the society as a whole. Librarians are not an isolated group, vacuum-packed on library shelves. They are part of the larger struggles in the society.

A united front of all progressive people – Black and White – is the only force that can defeat racism. There are many progressive White people ready to join hands with Black

people struggling for their rights. One of the main tasks is to identify all progressive people. Only by joint action will we ensure “equal” service for all. The struggle will be hard and long, but hopefully things will change. The Government’s initiatives in addressing issues of “social exclusion” provide a new framework for the LIS workers to take a strategic approach to addressing the issues of racism in the information services. Without such a strategic approach, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to eliminate racism.

In the final analysis, our goal is to make diversity “less of an issue”, as Winston (1996) says:

Our goal should not be to raise issues of diversity simply to hear ourselves talk or “keep our agenda on the table,” but to create libraries with the staff, collections, policies, and services that embody diversity as a value so that it is far less of an issue.

All LIS workers need to take up this challenge.

There is currently a good prospect of achieving meaningful change. For the first time in many years, there is national debate about racism as a result of the Stephen Lawrence campaign and Report. The 2002 IFLA Conference in Glasgow has as its theme “Libraries for Life: Democracy, Diversity, Delivery.” If the momentum created by the Stephen Lawrence Report leads to positive change, we can go the IFLA Conference to proclaim a new era of non-racist LIS service and workplaces. If not, perhaps we had better not make an appearance at Glasgow.

Notes

- 1 The term Black is used in its political sense to include all people from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean and all those who consider themselves Black. It includes those born in Britain but whose parents or grandparents came from Africa, Asia or the Caribbean. It is meant to highlight aspects that unite people on the basis of their common history of oppression. The term often used in the USA is “People of Color”. The TUC, Unison and many other progressive organisations have Black sections today. The term “ethnic minority” is used less today because of its association with marginality, as one of the librarians says in Olden *et al.* (1996).
- 2 Details of these professions examining institutional racism in their own field are given in the author’s forthcoming publication (Durrani, 1999b).

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