



**Case Study: Decolonising Our Libraries: A
Brief Exploration of Decolonisation in
Library and Information Science**

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What I will talk about today

Introduction - the importance of 'the human side'

Context - the impact of colonialism on LIS – the academic discipline and the profession

Evidence - examples from research to illustrate staff perceptions of cultural diversity and empathy – and how this relates to decolonisation

Actions – identifying actions/recommendations in relation to decolonising



**Introduction: The importance
of 'the human side'**

For now, let's focus on the human, not the systems...

‘Every LIS program realizes the vitality and ubiquity of technology and offers core technology courses, despite the fact that not every LIS graduate will end up in a highly technology-saturated environment. At the same time, **practically every LIS graduate will work in a diverse setting with diverse community members, regardless of the type of library or information technology (IT) setting.**’ (Dali and Caidi, 2021, pp.14-15)

‘...after two decades of LIS teaching and research, the author...agrees with Dali and Caidi that **our discipline may have somewhat lost its focus on the human, in favour of systems.**’ (Birdi, 2022, p.92)


The equitable and responsive library service



Nicole Cooke

‘Although public, academic, school and special libraries may vary in ways resources and services are provided, **an equitable and responsive library should be responsive to the heterogeneous society in which it exists**; it should be actively involved in creating experiences for the community, with the community’s input, and should have culturally and linguistically diverse collections and services.’

Cooke, N. (2017). *Information services to diverse populations*, pp.2-3.



Context: the impact of colonialism on Library and Information Science (LIS) as a discipline, and as a profession

What is 'decolonising', and how is it relevant to LIS?

Growing agenda to 'decolonise the university', i.e. to draw attention to the colonial history of the campus.

According to Bhabra et al. (2018, p.2), decolonising offers:

1. 'A way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study'
2. '...alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis'.



Gurminder Bhabra

The reach of colonialism across the Social Sciences

‘The division of labour amongst the disciplines of the social sciences... follows the distinction between the ‘modern’ world of colonisers (Sociology, Political Science, Economics) and the ‘traditional’ formerly colonised world (Development Studies, Anthropology).’ Although ‘much has been done to blur these geographical boundaries, which made sense in the age of empires’, **we are still working with ‘these dichotomies (First World/Third World, Global North/Global South, Developed/Developing, etc.) in how we understand the disciplinary division of labour within the Social Sciences today.’** (Williams et al., 2020, 7).

The colonial imprint on libraries, and the LIS profession

The perceptions:

‘Librarianship has long been a profession dominated by women, specifically white women.’ (Cooke, 2017, p.3)

‘As a profession, we’re approximately 90% cardigan.’ (Senior male LIS professional, CILIP panel meeting, 2018)

‘[Asked whether the homogenous LIS workforce had implications for the delivery of socially inclusive services] I’m inclined to say yes it should, but I’m not so sure in practice, **as long as the white, middle-aged women are open minded and good at their job.**’ (Birdi, Wilson & Mansoor, 2012)

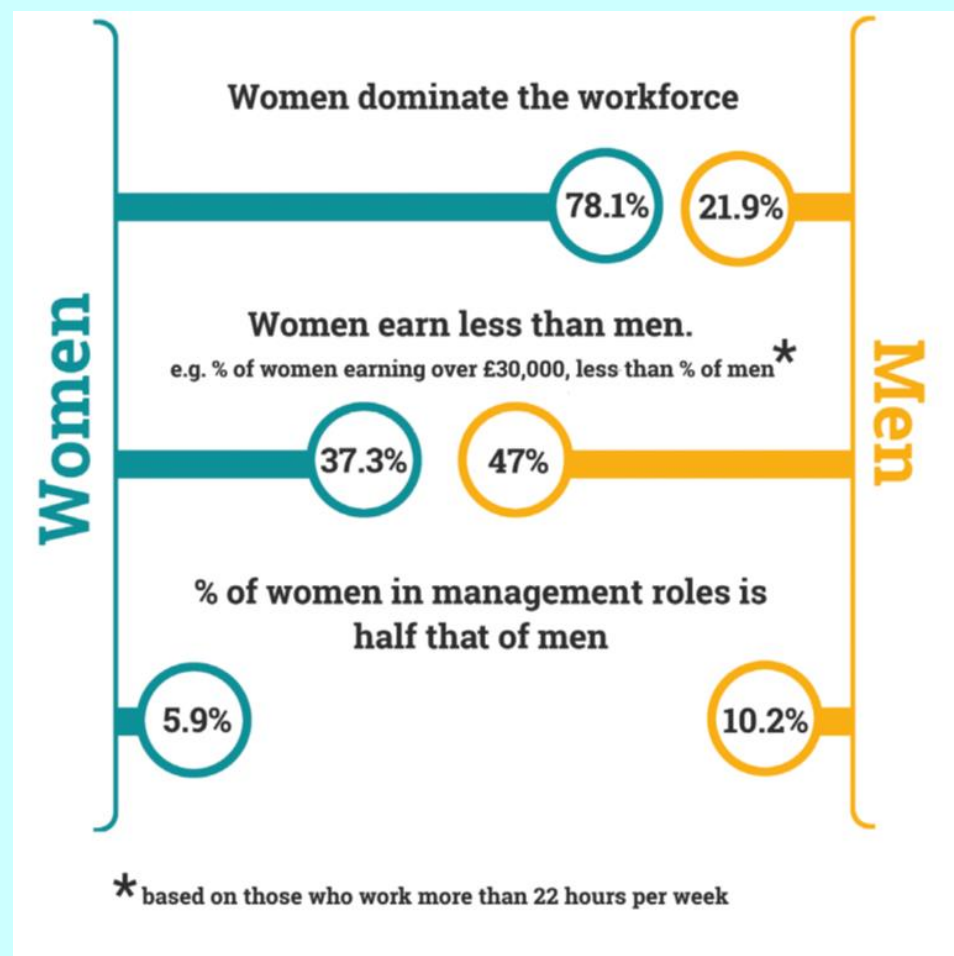
Gender, ethnicity, stereotypes, leadership...


Is this what library staff 'look like'?

The data:

- Women dominate the workforce (78.1% female, 50.1% in the UK workforce as a whole)
- Men in the sector earn more than women (the percentage of males in senior mgt roles almost double that of females (10.2% - 5.9%))
- 96.7% of the workforce identify as 'white' compared to 87.5% identifying as 'white' in *UK Labour Force Survey* statistics

<https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/Workforcesurvey/>

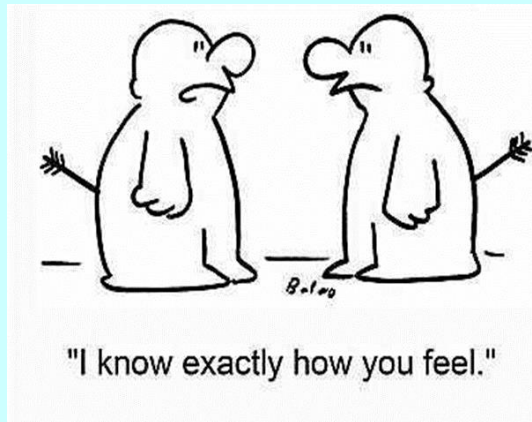




Evidence: examples from research to illustrate staff perceptions of cultural diversity and empathy – and how this relates to decolonisation

What is empathy, and why is it important?

Empathy: *The power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation. (OED, 2022)*



Empathy research (Birdi & Wilson)

Research aim: *To investigate public library staff attitudes towards social inclusion policy and disadvantaged groups in society, testing the relationships between the social, cultural and professional background of the staff and their capacity to make an effective, empathic contribution to social inclusion objectives.*

Findings theme 1: Empathy & cultural representation

- ❑ **Public library staff culturally homogenous:** sample predominantly female, White British, middle-aged, middle class (felt to be a fair representation of the occupational group)
- ❑ **Staff cultural profiles felt by many to be irrelevant:** but a direct correlation between effective staff performance (related to empathy) and living/working in the same community.
- ❑ **Differentiation between staff with a ‘natural aptitude’ (intuitive empathy) for working with excluded groups and those without:** in a culturally homogenous workforce, levels of ‘learned’ (cognitive) empathy appear to be higher.

Findings theme 2: Social justice and community librarianship


- ❑ 50%+ of survey respondents ‘partly aware’ of national social exclusion policy and debate:** qualitative data suggests that awareness is considerably lower.
- ❑ The role of, and need for, effective training is a priority :** some dissatisfaction with ‘outdated’ training methods within local authorities, some significant benefits of external ‘tailored training’.
- ❑ The impact of local government culture & political objectives is putting a strain on the traditional ideology of ‘community librarianship’:** social inclusion objectives inter-linked with ‘quick-fix’ and ‘tick box’ approaches.

Equality and diversity in LIS research

Mansoor (2006) – ‘Increasing cultural diversity in white libraries may ultimately benefit not just ethnic minorities, or white users, but ultimately may...benefit society as a whole.’

Birdi, Wilson & Mansoor (2011) ‘I think that what we should strive for is Britishness, and that involves everybody, I really hope that we should encourage open-mindedness. And that’s allowing you to engage with other cultures, and in doing so learn more about other cultures and in doing so learn more about yourself.’ (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000611426299>)

Syed (2014) – Developing the culturally competent librarian (PhD thesis) - ‘There is an implicit understanding amongst library staff ...that the service has a unique position in disseminating information and awareness about other cultures, and that the library itself is a free and neutral meeting ground that can be used to bring diverse people together. The understanding is there, but perhaps the execution is not.’



Actions: identifying actions/recommendations in relation to decolonising, and improving cultural diversity

Libraries are not ‘one-size-fits-all’ – but they must try to ‘fit all’



Nicole Cooke

‘Librarians are champions of equitable access to materials and information, and...they have a legal obligation to provide service without discrimination based **on class, race, gender, sexuality, religion, or other defining social or physical** characteristics.’

‘Library services are not one-size-fits-all, rather libraries should be as flexible, accommodating, and as diverse as our communities...libraries should be able to meet their communities where they are, **instead of offering a prepared slate of services and resources deemed suitable for them.**’

How to decolonise the library



Jos Damen

(Jos Damen, Head of the Library and ICT Dept, African Studies Centre, Leiden, NL
<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2019/06/27/decolonize-the-library-academic/>)

‘Leiden University is strong in Asian and African studies and so its library therefore buys books from China, Indonesia, South Africa, Ethiopia and other countries. **Yet more than 90 per cent of the library collection still originates from ‘Northern’ sources.** Such a reliance on ‘Northern’ books and publishing houses means that we are missing out on important information and perspectives.’

‘What we need is to bring into the library new voices – voices we haven’t heard before.’

3 tips for a more diverse library:

1. Go South!
2. Reconsider the collection policy
3. Open Access

Selected recommendations (in brief)

1. **Redefining public library roles & services** – service objectives should be explicitly related to individual areas of social policy, one-size-fits-all approach inappropriate.
2. **Staff recruitment and selection** – recruitment from other sectors; cultural representation not only related to ethnicity.
3. **Internal communication and staff support systems** – A more inclusive approach should be developed to service planning.
4. **Staff training and development** – More consistent effort made to provide relevant training and information on social justice.