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How empathic are we?

In this article, Briony Birdi and Kerry Wilson present findings from a national study into the nature and role of empathy in public librarianship.

Introduction

For the past two years we have been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council to explore the attitudes of public library staff towards social inclusion policy and disadvantaged groups in society. What is the relationship between the ethnic, cultural, social and professional background of staff, and their capacity to make an effective, empathic contribution to social inclusion objectives? Our project, 'The right *man* for the job? The role of empathy in community librarianship', has involved a large number of library staff in both the fieldwork and in a research workshop held at Sheffield University in October 2007. It has been a fascinating process, and one which we hope our colleagues will find as interesting and useful as we have.

There are many definitions of the concept of empathy, and much discussion as to which is most appropriate. The Oxford English Dictionary (2008) defines it as 'the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation'ⁱ, and Aldridge and Rigby (2001) suggest that it is 'the ability to see another person's world through their eyes'ⁱⁱ. In the workplace, empathy is frequently associated with the medical professions, used to develop open, trusting relationships between practitioners and patients. It has also been suggested that empathy is 'a core skill which applies to all helping functions'ⁱⁱⁱ (Shulman, 1979), one of which is, of course, the public librarian. As we all know, the public library has long been regarded as one of the key institutions to tackle social inclusion, so it was felt that a study of the empathic skills of public librarians would be of great value.

Our research methods

National survey

A postal survey was conducted in Autumn 2006, during which 1100 questionnaires were distributed to a sample of 90 public library authorities in total (within and across the nine English regions) in batches of 10, 15 and 20. A total of 453 completed questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 41%.

The specific aims and objectives of the survey were to provide a statistical profile of staff demographics in terms of gender, age, ethnic group, highest educational qualification, secondary education experience, region, length of time in public library service, type of authority, CILIP membership and category, and current role. Quantitative measures of professional empathy were also developed, in order to explore staff attitudes towards the community role for the public library, professional roles and responsibilities in addressing exclusion, and towards socially excluded groups.

Focus groups and interviews

A series of focus groups with frontline staff, and interviews with senior managers, was conducted during Spring-Summer 2007, in order to investigate, for example:

- The extent of staff participation (including willingness to become involved) in social inclusion policy implementation
- The effects of internal politics, including communication, training and 'professional inclusion' upon attitudes towards social inclusion policy
- Future plans for social inclusion at a local level.

Additional research methods were also used, such as a job vacancy profiling exercise, a series of case studies exploring individual initiatives, and a literature review. The following section gives a brief summary of key findings, although for a fuller account readers may wish to see the final report.

Summary of research findings

Empathy and cultural representation

Our research sample of 453 public library staff in England was culturally homogenous, with respondents being predominantly female (79.%) and White-British (89.6%), with 32.7% of the sample describing themselves as female, White-British, and middle-aged. Overall, it was felt that the sample was a fair representation of the occupational group on a national basis. For example, if we consider the ethnic profile specifically, the most recent Library Workforce Survey, conducted in 2005, revealed that within the library workforce 6.7% of staff were from ethnic minorities, 83.8% were white, whilst information on the remaining 9.5% was not known (Employers' Organisation, 2006:11^{iv}).

When asked to discuss cultural representation, respondents at all levels tended to refer to ethnicity in the first instance, rather than to age, gender or social class, cultural characteristics that are arguably of equal importance when considering social exclusion:

'Back in the early eighties I went to a racism awareness course where we were memorably described as the white highlands... and it's not changed an awful lot since then...' (North East FG)

'I can only speak for the library service and that is 100% white, reasonably middle class, quite diverse in age and overwhelmingly female' (West Midlands FG)

Both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that some respondents believed that staff cultural profiles are irrelevant to empathy, and that as public librarians they are sufficiently empathic to provide responsive and sensitive library services for a wide range of users and social groups:

'...you don't have to be the same to have empathy in a given situation' (West Midlands FG)

'I'm inclined to say yes it should [present issues], but I'm not so sure in practice, as long as the white middle aged women are open minded and good at their job. To say that it raises issues suggests that they're not good at their job really, but again some are better than others' (South East FG)

Other staff, however, felt that traditionally disadvantaged groups place a greater degree of trust and confidence in people they can recognise as familiar, relate to and understand, such as people of a similar age or people from the same neighbourhoods. A direct correlation was made between effective staff performance and the concept of living and working in the same communities:

'It does have an impact though, those first impressions can turn someone round and right back out of the door. Even in a small library, if it's quiet and it's just you and one or two members of staff that you don't immediately relate to, it will feel strange and put you off, particularly if you don't go in to libraries on a regular basis.' (London FG)

'... people coming in want to see people like them in the library don't they? Otherwise they assume it's only a place for white middle-aged middle class women!' (East of England FG)

Skills, partnerships and professional identity

There is evidence of 'role strain' and of a lack of confidence amongst some public library staff working with certain target groups, such as disaffected teenagers, or adults with mental health and substance abuse problems. Staff do not always feel that they have the necessary skills and experience to work under such conditions, or believe that they should be expected to do so within their roles as public library staff:

'... we're all aware of physical disabilities but mental health issues cause us problems because we're not trained for that... but we have to get on with it, otherwise they wouldn't have a library service' (West Midlands FG)

'There is a question to what extent is it our job? I mean yes, we're working in a public service you're going to get a bit of that, but you're not a youth worker, you're not a social worker, so down which road do you go?' (North East FG)

Nonetheless, the benefits of working in partnership with relevant external agencies were frequently described throughout the project. The ability to draw upon the skills, knowledge and experiences of professionals from other sectors and social services, and to use networks to effectively target new user groups and communities, is felt to be invaluable within the social inclusion context:

'I do a lot of work with Surestart and we have very similar objectives to meet, so it's an extremely useful partnership for us and a good way to reach hard to reach groups' (North West FG)

'I'm trying to get local authorities to agree to sign prisoners up to libraries before they leave prison... the reason being that they do actually become library users in prison, maybe for the first time... and we don't want to lose that...' (North East FG)

The use of volunteers from community groups themselves is also important in facilitating genuinely empathic library services that are relevant and responsive to actual community and user needs.

'It also benefits the community when people come in and see different people working there... its easier for them if they don't speak English, or are refugees themselves, its easier for them to see other people and think OK, they're not white, or traditionally white English' (East Midlands FG)

'It helps to work with the communities themselves... we've been very fortunate in having some of Chinese community members catalogue our Chinese collection in English and Mandarin, so things like that help enormously'' (East of England FG)

Comments made by participants regarding the generic skills required to be an effective librarian, and the benefits of drawing upon the knowledge and experiences of alternative sectors and community volunteers, have led to further debate regarding the role and value of accredited library qualifications and 'professional' status for library staff with community-based and social inclusion roles. Evidence was collected of growing recruitment from alternative sectors, and a certain level of acceptance amongst some participants that a library qualification is not a prerequisite for effective community-based library services:

'...in the old days we used to only have chartered librarians but now in the city they've taken off that as an essential, you can actually be a senior community librarian if you have experience of working with the communities and not necessarily a degree, so that barrier has gone and it's opened it up to what experience people actually have when looking at is as a career... ' (East Midlands FG)

'We have what we call...a library outreach worker... so her job now is very specific, to undertake outreach all the time and it's not a requirement that she is a qualified librarian, so what we've said is that outreach and communication in the community is a vital thing' (London FG)

Some respondents, however, defended quite strongly the position of the professional librarian, and his or her relevance to the contemporary public library service. A need was stated for professional standards and accountability, for specific training in senior service management, finance, marketing, and for 'traditional' skills such as subject knowledge, stock selection and cataloguing:

'...internally promoted experienced non-professionals can get caught up in restructurings and end up struggling and out of their depth... How much better to have professionally designated roles for librarians, finance, marketing, training, senior managers and leaders so people have some professional training for what they are doing?' (South West FG)

'...we have to keep professional standards... I disagree with the move towards retail standards and the negative assumption that library work is easy... librarians are as qualified as doctors and should be recognised as such... as the remit of public libraries gets more and more challenging we need professional skills to deliver the best service' (South East FG)

'I find the lack of appreciation that is becoming apparent in some authorities lately for the fact that professionals have committed themselves to the profession by qualifying very depressing.' (South West FG)

Social inclusion and community librarianship

The research has raised a number of points related to the contemporary concept of community librarianship. The impact of local government culture and political objectives is felt to be placing a strain on the traditional ideology of the concept, as social inclusion objectives are linked to what are described as 'quick-fix' or 'tick box' approaches:

'The need to tie in to the county council's plan [is]... about equality really in most aspects so you can hang these things on to it... I sometimes look at ours and think they've twisted that around to make that fit in there...' (East of England FG)

'We're regularly touted as the council's beacon of social inclusion, but this service has run for over 25 years quietly and efficiently... it annoys me to suddenly be re-branded as something we're not' (Yorkshire: Mobile Library Service Manager)

Potentially damaging is the theory that certain policies, and related target groups, are considered to be more 'accessible' than others. Certain public library staff with social inclusion roles have reported feelings of disillusionment, cynicism and low job satisfaction:

'...we've got inspectors in the authority at the moment and I keep getting phone calls saying 'what are you doing for over-50 African-Caribbeans, please ring the chief with evidence and photographs by one o'clock today' so the authority gets a sniffy couple of sentences then you have to produce the targeted stuff as well' (London FG)

'...we suffer a bit from fad-ism... buzz words [relating to the political agenda]... [we're] driven by local authority and their golden thread or flavour of the month... it feels like hoop jumping, and can seem too transitory and superficial to staff' (London FG)

Another consequence of this is the apparent tension - caused by demands on staff time and resources - between supplementary and mainstream services. Case studies, however, have provided examples of projects being effectively managed and resourced, and ultimately merged with mainstream services. The creation of specific posts has helped to facilitate this, and to create new roles and identities for the community librarian:

'My job is to be engaged with hard to reach groups, it was designed to establish contact with new communities, refugees, asylum seekers, EU nationals, travellers etc, and I had really carte blanche as to how I did that... I worked with partners and tried to get the actual groups involved themselves so that we actually started devising the services they wanted' (East Midlands FG)

Although the majority of survey respondents claimed to be either *partly aware* (57.6%) or *very aware* (36.4%) of current national social exclusion policy, the focus group and interview respondents felt that in practice, the level of awareness may be lower. There was an interesting contradiction with respect to front-line staff: many respondents described this group as

the most important facilitators of social inclusion, in their role of providing the day-to-day and face-to-face services. At the same time, they were also described as the group who least needed to know and understand policy and political objectives:

'I'd call it a general acceptance rather than awareness, they know that policies and objectives are 'out there' but will be happy to accept guidance from above rather than get to grips with the actual policies' (South East FG)

'I don't think front-line staff do [need to be aware of policy] because their prime role is to serve the customer at the counter and the most important thing is how they treat that customer, not what bit of paper is saying that they should' (North East FG)

Staff training

The role of, and need for, effective training in this area was discussed and prioritised by research respondents. Some participants were dissatisfied with 'outdated' training methods used within their services, particularly those delivered with the aim of improving cultural awareness amongst staff:

'I don't think that some of the attempts made at cultural awareness training are really appropriate... I went on a course about raising cultural awareness relating to Pakistani communities... the history of Pakistan, the culture and the food... None of it addressed the *British* issues of multiculturalism ... These are the issues we should be talking about and how to address them' (Yorkshire FG)

'The training tends to be very localised and on a need to know basis, which is good for the community outlook, but less beneficial when you ask about policy and how we fit in to the wider agenda.' (North West FG)

Despite this dissatisfaction, data from the case studies and research workshop would suggest that significant benefits can be derived from training in improving staff confidence and capacity to deliver inclusive services, particularly with targeted disadvantaged groups. Workshop participants made a direct link between training received and improved empathy skills amongst staff:

'Those staff who have been trained are good, there's a direct link between training received and empathy.'

'Sometimes, people are trying hard to help, but a lack of training means that they get it wrong.'

A training priority would seem to be to address the apparent gap in staff knowledge and understanding of social inclusion policy and political drivers. Staff at all levels working within services and projects that are responsive to such drivers should be informed of relevant external and political influences, and given the opportunity to question and discuss them further, thereby engaging with the reasons for particular service developments and initiatives.

Similarly, more relevant training could be provided, with information on groups affected by social exclusion, in an attempt to significantly raise levels of awareness and cultural sensitivity amongst all staff.

Final thoughts

In such a brief discussion of a large-scale research project, conclusions can seem superficial, yet having considered a cross-section of the findings it would be fair to conclude that it would be difficult to teach an emotional response that is informed and influenced by personality, belief systems and other individual characteristics. However, by making sure that all staff have appropriate knowledge and information, are involved in decision-making processes, and have developed the appropriate skills they can be enabled to show higher levels of empathy towards disadvantaged groups, providing that they are willing and have some natural capacity to do so.

In this way, recruiting the right 'man' for the job will be a vital part of public libraries' contribution to the social inclusion agenda, and should be an absolute priority for the future of community librarianship.

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Further information

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Full details of the research project and its findings are available from the project website:

<http://www.shef.ac.uk/is/research/centres/cplis/research/rightman.html>

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^{iv} Employers' Organisation (2006) *Library Workforce Survey for 2005*. London: Employers' Organisation for Local Government.