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‘Not just for ethnics: exploring the impact of a black fiction intervention on public library users

Interpreting Communities: Minority Writing in European Literary Fields

30 October 2015

Briony Birdi

What can a social scientist contribute to a discussion on minority writing?

Before I begin, a brief note to explain myself! As you will have realised from my abstract, I’m a social scientist – although I do have a modern languages first degree! – so my approach to the subject of minority writing is perhaps a little different from yours. However, I think that I have a useful contribution to make to the discussion with my research, looking firstly at the context in which minority reading is read and promoted, and at the readers themselves, who I argue can be overlooked.

My own empirical work is very focused on practice – in my case on the book trade and the public library service – but I hope that you will still find it interesting, for 3 reasons:

1. I’m exploring a context in which minority writing is promoted and read
2. I’m drawing from social science research methods and theories to understand changes in reading behaviour
3. I’m bringing together different theoretical approaches to understand readers’ attitudes towards different fiction genres.

I have published on this research within the social sciences, but given the interdisciplinary nature of my work I also find it hugely beneficial to discuss my work with colleagues in the arts and humanities.

The origins of my research

First, a note on the origins of my research in minority writing, and its socio-cultural context.

There is evidence to suggest that during the past three decades many local authorities have made a sustained effort to develop substantial collections of books by (for example) Black British, Black American, Asian and South Asian authors (Denny, in *The Bookseller*, 2006; Van Fleet, 2003), and a number of critics have observed that these books should be promoted more widely than the minority communities they will often depict (Elbeshausen and Skov, 2004; Jamal, 2001).

Good intentions, certainly, but libraries operate within a societal and political context, and it is now felt by many social commentators that the concept of ‘multiculturalism has not been entirely successful within the UK. Author and former radical Islamist Ed Husain described the impact of multiculturalism as ‘mono-cultural outposts in which the politics of race and religion were now being played out before my eyes’ (Husain, 2007, p.282).

However, in stark contrast to this is Kwei-Armah’s 2011 perception that British society has successfully absorbed what he describes as ‘new Britain’ and ‘old Britain’, arguably overcoming ‘incompatibility’ and ‘separation’: ‘We’ve still got a long way to go...however, I’m terribly proud of the progress that we have made...and I think that one of the beautiful things about living in Britain right now is that the new Britain and the old Britain can co-exist...and co-exist comfortably.’ (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2011)

What I wanted to know was which of these different perspectives of British society is reflected in the reading of the literature emerging from its minority ethnic communities? Are such texts produced and enjoyed only in Husain’s ‘mono-cultural outposts’, or is there felt to be a wider reading audience for a work which does indeed ‘co-exist comfortably’ with all English language fiction? And who is that reader?

Terminology

As the context for my research in minority writing is the public library and the book trade, the research design required the deliberate separation of so-called ‘minority ethnic fiction genres’ from other fiction genres in order to compare their readers to those of other genres. Whereas many works of fiction fall perhaps more comfortably into accepted fiction ‘genres’ typically used as means of grouping stock in public libraries (because of their obvious plot and character similarities) – Romance, Crime, Fantasy, etc.– it is not so straightforward to consider as a group all works of fiction by ‘black British’ authors, for example. Is it appropriate to describe such works as a genre, when they could arguably belong in several genre classifications, depending on the subject matter? Related to this, it was also a concern that separating these titles in this way would somehow reinforce a perception that the books should not be regarded as part of the ‘mainstream’ body of English language fiction within a library.

The labels used were not arrived at lightly. They were determined following a series of discussion between me and the advisory board for the funded research I'm referring to today, and were felt to appropriately describe the texts in question. It is relatively common for a number of the key stakeholders in this research – publishers, booksellers, library suppliers and public libraries – to use these terms in promoting the relevant titles to the reading public. The primary intention of grouping 'Black British fiction' and 'Asian fiction in English' - as distinct from any other fiction grouping - was to facilitate their examination for the research, using terms with which the research participants would hopefully be familiar, or would at least be able to understand.

But of course I acknowledge that the selection of culturally appropriate terms to describe a body of literature is by no means straightforward, and certain issues must be taken into account when doing so, and I acknowledge the controversial nature of any labels to describe such a complex and diverse range of books.

Public library materials for BME communities

As my own research is based within the public library context, I wanted to give a brief introduction to the general subject of library services and materials for minority ethnic communities over the years.

During the past three decades the perception that a person's inaccurate or stereotypical views of other ethnic cultures can be challenged, and even changed, by the engagement with fiction reflecting these cultures, has repeatedly been linked to a call for public libraries to promote minority ethnic fiction to all their users (Kendall, 1992; Mansoor, 2006; Peters, 2000). There is certainly evidence to suggest that many local authorities have made a sustained effort to develop substantial collections of books by (for example) Black British, Black American, Asian and South Asian authors (Denny, in *The Bookseller*, 2006; Van Fleet, 2003), and a number of critics have observed that these books should be promoted more widely than the minority communities they will often depict (Elbeshausen and Skov, 2004; Jamal, 2001).

Reading and intercultural understanding

Related to this and moving away from the specifically linguistic provision of multicultural resources, we can also consider the provision of such materials in the English language, and their capacity to reach a wider readership. In line with the theory of multiculturalism that society becomes richer as one's cultural horizons are expanded (Parekh, 2000; Sturges, 2004), it has also been suggested that there may be a benefit to all members of the community of being exposed to materials about other ethnic cultures, as part of the reflection of a culturally diverse society (Elkin, 2003; Guerena and Erazo, 2000).

Supply chain

The first part of my work was a review of previous research into the nature of minority ethnic fiction and its supply, promotion and readership. This was structured according to the five perceived elements of the fiction supply chain – the author, the book trade, the library supplier, the public library, the reader – examining the provision of minority ethnic fiction via the UK public library system in particular, and found that its readership was the subject of only very limited previous research.

Much of the literature relating to the authorship of Black British fiction and Asian fiction in English is concerned with the question of authenticity; that authors from minority ethnic communities often feel obliged to reflect these communities in the fiction they write, rather than having the freedom to present a totally imagined setting for their work. Regarding the book trade, the vast majority of the literature about minority ethnic fiction originates from within the book trade itself, in professional journal articles and reports. This reveals the relatively low profile of this type of fiction in both the publishing and bookselling industries, despite certain 'breakthrough' texts by more well-known authors. Both academic research and the professional literature suggest that library suppliers are not always playing their role in providing minority ethnic fiction for public libraries, although some authors (Usherwood, 2007; Van Riel et al, 2008) argue that library staff can also damage the supply chain with poor or ill-informed stock specifications.

The main body of academic literature in this field relates to the public library service, its provision of services to minority ethnic communities, the limited diversity – and sometimes limited tolerance - of its staff, and the supply of materials to minority ethnic communities.

Certainly, previous research in the field of public librarianship has tended to focus on the services for non-vernacular speaking communities (Clough and Quarmby, 1978; Roach and Morrison, 1998; Vaagan, 2003). More recent research that I and others have conducted (Birdi et al, 2012) has emphasised the role of public libraries in supporting members of different communities for whom language may no longer be an issue, but for whom culture may still remain a primary concern.

Furthermore, the final part of the supply chain – the reader – had not been addressed to any significant extent by previous research. We know that the literature is very much divided as to the identity of the reader of so-called ‘minority ethnic fiction’. Young wrote in 2006 of ‘the problem of the double audience’, by which he is referring both to those readers who are from the same ethnic group as the author (the ‘insiders’) and those who are not. A divided readership could be encouraged by the way in which books are shelved, whether as a separate ‘black interest’ (or similar) section, or as part of the overall collection. My own research therefore comprised an investigation of the readership of minority ethnic fiction by all readers, whatever their ethnic origin.

The empirical research

The first empirical study I conducted was a general survey of the reading habits and attitudes of library users in the East Midlands region, with a particular focus on Black British and British Asian books. This was conducted as part of an evaluation of black bytes, a public library fiction promotion of fifty titles (in the first instance) written in the English language by Black British authors. As an intervention it aimed to increase, using reader development methods, the readership of Black British fiction by both minority and majority communities. I was employed by Opening the Book, a reading promotion agency, to evaluate the promotion. Although the titles within the promotion itself were uniquely Black British, the focus of the study was expanded to include British Asian authors writing in English, in order to broaden the investigation of attitudes towards British minority ethnic fiction.

On screen are covers from a few of the books from the promotion, which went out across libraries in the East Midlands.

Measuring the effects of the reading intervention

A brief, quantitative reading habit survey was devised, and distributed by library staff at issue points in 16 libraries in the nine participating local authorities. This consisted of 5 simple questions, and using typical genre classifications used by public libraries, asked readers which genres they were borrowing from today and would usually borrow from, which genres they would not consider reading, and which factors would influence them in choosing their books. Findings from this study have already been published, but for today I wanted to briefly cover the longitudinal aspect of the survey. It was designed to be distributed at library issue points at two separate time-points, i.e. prior to, and towards the end of, the installation of the black bytes promotion. A key aspect of the longitudinal evaluation was the inclusion of five 'control' libraries in addition to the 16, i.e. libraries in which the black bytes promotion would not be installed.

25 questionnaires were given to one library in each of five of the nine participating authorities, and were distributed on the same two occasions as the libraries with the promotion. In combination, these two measures enabled an investigation as to whether black bytes had a noticeable impact on the fiction borrowing habits of the library user. Before the promotion we collected 552 questionnaires (428 experimental, 124 control), and afterwards 495 (377 experimental, 118 control).

I realise that graphs are not particularly commonplace at conferences such as this, but you may be interested in this brief illustration of what we found [graph shown in presentation]: Statistical (chi-square) tests showed that there was a significant increase in respondents from experimental libraries (i.e. those with the promotion) reporting that they were 'usual' readers of Black British fiction after the intervention had taken place (chi-square = 7.37, $p < .01$), whereas the control group (those from libraries without the promotion) showed no significant change between the two time points (chi-square = 0.27, ns).

Tests also showed that there was a reduction (7.8%) between the two time-points in the number of respondents from experimental libraries who would not choose to read the genre, whereas the proportion of respondents from control libraries who would choose not to read Black British fiction had increased slightly (1.0%). This indicates that those respondents from experimental libraries were now less likely than before not to choose the genre, after the black bytes promotion had taken place.

Not just for ethnics...

In addition to the survey, I also conducted interviews with 21 participants, and a number of these commented on the separateness of minority ethnic (specifically Black) collections or promotions in public libraries, generally supporting the views of researchers in the field that materials can be difficult to find, but could – and do - have a wider appeal than minority ethnic communities:

‘I think the last time I went in there was a section on black writers...I think the idea would be for a more general appeal, because it probably just highlights, shows that there are talented Black writers, and this is what they’ve got to offer, so it wouldn’t just be for Ethnics.’ (Study 1, DA8)

‘It [the black bytes promotion] has a general appeal, because I think that everybody needs to be made aware of how black culture is influenced by English culture in this country...I think that anybody, once they had picked up a book [from the promotion] and started to read it, they would probably find it really interesting.’ (Study 1, FB12)

Explaining the findings: reader response theory

My research has revealed an openness on the part of many respondents to read from a wide range of genres, and to try new material. The longitudinal component to the study I’ve briefly covered today indicated that there had been a positive change in attitudes towards fiction reading as a result of the intervention of the black bytes fiction promotion.

Reader response theory, and the related concept of reader development, can help us to explain this pattern of respondent behaviour; in reader response theory the reader plays a critical role, participating in a ‘triangular relationship’ between ‘reader, text and the interaction between the two’ (Appleyard, 1994, p.6). The term ‘reader-centred practice’ (Train, 2003, pp.35-6) has become frequently used in the application of reader response theory to library and information science, now commonly described as ‘reader development’. In line with reader response theory, the concept of reader development aims to raise the status of reading as a creative act, to increase people’s confidence in their reading, and to bring isolated readers together (Van Riel, 1992, p. 4). It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that certain survey respondents appear to have opened up their reading choices, perhaps even increased in reading confidence as a result.

Conclusion: a plea to open the universe

It seems appropriate to conclude with an insight from an author who frequently featured in library users' discussions of minority writing in public libraries:

'There's a beautiful image in Saul Bellow's latest novel, *The Dean's December*. The central character, the Dean, Corde, hears a dog barking wildly somewhere. He imagines that the barking is the dog's protest against the limit of dog experience. "For God's sake", the dog is saying, "open the universe a little more!" And because Bellow is, of course, not really talking about dogs, I have the feeling that the dog's rage, and its desire, is also mine, ours, everyone's. "For God's sake, open the universe a little more!"' (Rushdie, 1992, p.21)

Although the book to which Rushdie refers in the above comment was written neither by a 'Black British' nor a 'British Asian' author, I wanted to refer to it here for two reasons. Firstly, because Rushdie regards a book by a white, Canadian-born American author as important and highly relevant to his own life as an Indian-born British writer, and secondly because it could very easily contain the plea of so many authors from minority ethnic communities whose work has been the subject of much of my research: a plea to other authors, to publishers, booksellers, library suppliers, librarians and readers, to open their collective universes and to ensure that their interpretation of terms such as 'fiction' and 'literature' are as broad and all-encompassing as they could be.

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