

Diversity is not the answer: towards anti-racist praxis in LIS

Abstract:

This paper outlines the theoretical foundations of an ongoing research project examining the presence and force of systemic racism in library and information science scholarship and practice. It examines how uncritical attachment to core values like neutrality, objectivity, colour-blindness and diversity have served to entrench practices that marginalize and exclude racialized groups. Finally, it draws on scholarship in critical diversity and anti-racism studies to theorize new research trajectories for LIS that are attuned to structural dimensions of power and privilege.

1. Introduction

In the field of Library and Information Science (LIS), there is a long and problematic history of adopting the perspective that information and libraries exist outside of race and social structures like systemic and institutional racism. It is, perhaps, amongst the most contradictory and paradoxical fallacies within the field and its research communities. Race exists outside our spaces and gives relevance to our social justice frameworks. It enters our discourse when we aim to position ourselves and our work as essential to the social fabric of society. Yet we rarely speak about how the social conditions of race influence the decisions that we make in our work and what we study or consider the effects of these decisions on others. In fact, there are significant gaps in our scholarship on culturally relevant information needs and practices of racialized groups. We know even less about what social and cultural inclusion might look like in practice.

This paper presents the theoretical foundations of ongoing research that explores the systemic ways in which racism is endemic to LIS. It begins by problematizing notions of neutrality and objectivity and shows that failing to address the dominance of whiteness, redress racial injustice, and acknowledge the force of race is a powerful act of racism itself (Honma 2005; Hudson 2017a, Hudson 2017b; Kendi 2019; Schlesselman-Tarango 2017). In the field of LIS, responses to these critiques often center around the ways that the field aims to foster and support diversity. However, these perspectives overlook how racial, economic, and cultural marginalization resist social inclusion and the deeply ingrained institutionalization of racism (Ahmed 2012). Drawing on the work of Ibram X. Kendi, 2019 Guggenheim Fellow and director of the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University, the final section presents a pragmatic and agentic argument for the LIS community to recast its work within an anti-racist framework. This paper directly responds to the theme of *Bridging Divides: Confronting Colonialism and Anti-Black Racism* and theorizes points of analytic departure that intersect and enter into dialogue with anti-racist and critical diversity discourses to inform trajectories of future scholarship.

2. Terminology

It is important to foreground this work in an explicit understanding of key terms and concepts used. In its general sense, racialized refers to those who do not possess the societal privileges

associated with the dominant white identity and intersects with forms of socioeconomic, cultural, and social marginalization (Gans 2016). Terms like racialization and racialized are signifiers of a process and the result (Gans 2016). Race, itself, is the embodiment of this hierarchical structure of privilege. Thus, racialized aims to convey systemic processes of inequity that result in degrees of varying social, cultural, and economic opportunities that are both embodied and experienced (Kendi 2019). However, racialized groups cannot be conceived as a homogenized entity and they do not have a unified experience or speak from a single voice. Rather, its usage signifies similar experiences of marginalization and acknowledges negotiation of identity in concert with social factors like race, class, gender, and migration. The usage of the term racialized is not wholly unproblematic because it can imply an assumption of disadvantage and a one-dimensional comparison of oppressor and oppressed (Tuck 2009; Kendi 2019). In this work, its usage aims to focus on the complex relationships of power and privilege that are tacit in institutional power.

3. Racism is endemic to the work of library and information science

While provocative and jarring, this paper suggests that racism must be recognized as endemic to the field of LIS and is sustained through the absence of substantial and consistent theoretical frameworks on race and racial oppression. This results from having uncritically tethered our theoretical frameworks and practices to Western notions of neutrality and objectivity that signify white normativity as the legitimate and appropriate way of knowing (Honma 2005; Hudson 2017a, Hudson 2017b; Schlesselman-Tarango 2017). This serves to reinforce whiteness in our scholarship and renders LIS incapable of envisioning transformative modes of practice that account for race and privilege. This claim is supported by a wide body of interdisciplinary research that also problematizes many of the same issues around the dominance of whiteness and the power dynamics implicit in institutional relationships (Hansen and Dim 2019; Hogarth and Fletcher 2018; Johnson 2018; Mullings, Morgan, and Quelleng 2016; Sheppard, 2017).

4. Diversity is not the answer

LIS scholars such as Honma (2005), Hudson (2017) and Schlesselman-Tarango (2017) offer compelling and important accounts of the limits of diversity in response to systemic racism. As a field, we often express the importance of diversity and multiculturalism through position statements such as the *Library Service to Multicultural Communities* by Canadian Federation of Library Associations and similar works. In these, we affirm the rights of racial and ethnic users to access culturally relevant information, commit to partnerships with these communities, and lay claim to our important role in promoting inclusivity (CFLA 2016). Yet we fail to recognize that colour-blindness and neutrality mask cultural privilege and, in doing so, we fail to see systemic inequity in librarianship and information science research. Critical diversity theorists such as Sara Ahmed provide insight into how the institutionalization of dominant identities and norms become forms of oppression (2012). She describes institutionalization as a process of recession such that perspectives “become routine or ordinary” and do not present as problematic (Ahmed 2012, 22). In this uncritical dynamic, diversity can only achieve minor gains that are tantamount to a performance or representation of other cultures within expressly white power structures.

5. Anti-Racist Praxis for LIS

In recent years, there has been rising attention paid to how systemic and institutional racism is a deeply embedded and often invisible form of marginalization. The Government of Ontario describes these processes as “hidden institutional biases in policies, practices and processes that privilege or disadvantage people based on race” and is rooted in organizational perspectives around “doing things the way they’ve always been done without considering how they impact particular groups differently”(Government of Ontario 2018, para 12). Canada’s Anti-Racism Strategy 2019–2022 also notes that inequitable access and inappropriate services are a pronounced form of racial discrimination (Government of Canada 2019). The call from both levels of government is to take seriously the work of understanding the processes and impact of institutional and systemic racism and take direct measures to acknowledge its presence and force.

To this end, the final section draws on the work of historian and political science scholar Kendi to argue that current approaches in LIS are misaligned with anti-racist measures and cannot account for race and discrimination in the field. Kendi’s groundbreaking work *How to be an Antiracist* argues that the guiding questions ought to be quite simple: does the work, policy or action account for different races and redress unequal institutional power relationships or does it ignore and/or deny a historical imbalance and further contribute to systemic racism? For Kendi, there are no shades of grey: our work is either explicitly anti-racist or it supports and further entrenches racism (2019). To be antiracist, we must acknowledge race and disentangle ourselves from the notion that our work should be neutral or non-political because in a world of racial injustice to be non-political is to place ourselves squarely on side with division and racism.

6. Moving Forward

Within the confines of the current literature, we can conclude that our existing theories are inadequate and do not account for the experiences of racialized groups. We can also identify salient points that indicate that the historical response to race in LIS has been contradictory and paradoxical. Beyond that, the aim of this paper is to present opportunities to open dialogue and engage with critical diversity and anti-racism scholarship. This spirit of librarianship and social responsibility is not necessarily a new or distinct change. Rather, it is reflective of many of the principles that the profession wants (or at least states that it wants) to enshrine and protect. Anti-racist methodologies and perspectives are a valuable and important tool to bridging the divide between theory and practice. They call attention to the schism between our policies and public facing documents that celebrate how social and cultural aspects of diverse communities enrich our spaces whilst blindly ignoring the contraindications of these principles in our work. In our field and scholarship in general, it is not well known is what information is suitable and supports anti-racist spaces and practices in public institutions. This is an area where LIS can significantly complement existing scholarship with evidence-based research on what information and practices can support and contribute to moving forward anti-racism measures. Exploring the potential of these areas of research will contribute to a growing and important body of scholarship that will be beneficial for the scholarly community, libraries, and other institutions.

References

- Ahmed, Sara. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Canadian Federation of Library Associations. *Library Service to Multicultural Communities*. Retrieved on January 27, 2020 from <http://cfla-fcab.ca/en/guidelines-and-position-papers/library-service-to-multicultural-communities/>
- Gans, Herbert J. "Racialization and racialization research". *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40 (3), 2017, pp. 341-52. DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2017.1238497](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1238497)
- Government of Ontario. *A Better Way Forward: Ontario's 3-Year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan*. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/better-way-forward-ontarios-3-year-anti-racism-strategic-plan> Accessed on January 27, 2020.
- Hansen, John G, and Emeka E. Dim. "Canada's Missing and Murdered Indigenous People and the Imperative for a More Inclusive Perspective." *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 2019). <https://doaj.org/article/6d9651a0c46d416685c82c46b2457eb2>.
- Hogarth, Kathy and Wendy Fletcher. A Space for Race: Decoding Racism, Multiculturalism, and Post-Colonialism in the Quest for Belonging in Canada and Beyond." *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 1 (January 1, 2019).
- Honma, Todd. "Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies". *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 1(2), 2005.
- Hudson, David James. On "Diversity" as Anti-Racism in Library and Information Studies: A Critique." *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1(1), 2017.
- Joseph, Ameil, and Daenzer, Patricia M. "Making Civility: Historical Racial Exclusion Technologies Within Canadian Democracy." In *Civil Society Engagement: Achieving Better in Canada*, 1:17–30. 1st ed. Routledge, 2017.
- Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Antiracist*. New York: One World, 2019.
- Mullings, Delores V., Morgan, Anthony, and Quelleng, Heather Kere. "Canada the Great White North Where Anti-Black Racism Thrives: Kicking Down the Doors and Exposing the Realities." *Phylon* (1960-) 53, no. 1 (June 1, 2016): 20–41.
- Schlesselman-Tarango, Gina. *Topographies of whiteness: Mapping whiteness in library and information science*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017.

Sheppard, Colleen. Challenging Systemic Racism in Canada. In E. Kennedy-Dubourdieu (Ed.), *Race and Inequality: World Perspectives on Affirmative Action* (pp. 57-76). London: Routledge, 2017.

Tuck, Eve. Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review* 79 (3): 409-28, 2009.