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Eliminating Racism in Education for Knowledge Organization and Library and Information Science An Intercontinental Position Statement

Abstract:

In this paper, we begin to take stock of the current landscape of antiracism initiatives in LIS and KO in France, the UK, and the USA. This exercise firstly identifies patterns of racism and racial prejudice on our campuses which are insufficiently addressed—and even potentially worsened—by current national and institutional policy and legislation. Secondly, the accreditation of LIS and KO higher degree programmes allows different degrees of antiracist material, ranging from essentially none to not enough, and we have not yet identified an example of an accreditation process which fosters more than a predominantly reactive approach to eliminating racism in KO or LIS as a whole. Thirdly, we regard Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a means of knowledge creation to include the widest possible range of sources and voices, a rigorous approach we can use to identify and remove previously inequitable hierarchies within our discipline.

1.0 Towards a Global Anti-Racism

The US scholar Todd Honma (2005) has argued that “LIS^[1] as a field of study is currently engaged in a *project of whitening*, one that may not necessarily be intentional but whose effects are still the same—the exclusion of voices of color within a field plagued by racism” (emphasis added). More recently, Bharat Mehra (2021, 105) has stated that “[w]e need to honestly acknowledge ‘whiteism’ in LIS education”, a discipline which has evolved “within a cultural climate of social, political, economic, and legal racism and systemic white privilege”. Meanwhile, Melissa Adler and Lindsey Harper (2018, 52, 54) argue that “classification is intrinsically tied to matters of race and ethnicity”, that “KO [knowledge organization] is integral to all areas of information practice”, and that “issues related to social justice, diversity, and inclusion are inherently KO issues”. Adler and Harper (2018, 57) also observe that, in recent years, “KO scholars are increasingly critiquing the positivist assumptions and methodologies upon which classification theory and practice are based”.

The optimism expressed in this last statement may have been fueled by ongoing conversations around race, racism and antiracism in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia and New Zealand. Indeed, the crafting of new antiracism and diversity curricula in higher education institutions (HEIs) in these countries is an encouraging sign. The new curricula represent a pivot to an antiracism pedagogy that is less performative, less commemorative and more substantive in cultural consciousness.

¹ While Honma uses LIS as an abbreviation for “library and information studies”, we use it in this paper to stand for “Library and Information Science”.

But the situation is far from uniform around the world. Indeed, after the outcry on the 2020 murder of George Floyd, the United States, Continental Europe and Eastern Europe are currently engaged in a “pushback” against the much needed antiracism actions and initiatives across different sectors of western societies. It appears that the old order to maintain white privilege and western hegemony is fighting back. We are witnessing a return to apathy and even hostility within academia to the explicit inclusion of antiracism content in curricula design and institutional policies. In Continental Europe, teaching and research on racism and colonial history have been relegated to history and sociology departments and taught from a white perspective.

Previous studies of critical KO have tended to focus (a) on the past, and (b) on activities in single countries and/or languages. The *historical* impact of racist attitudes on the choice of terminology and the design of hierarchical structures underlying library classification schemes, for example, has been intensively studied (see, e.g., Furner, 2007). Past studies and publications on racism in KO have tended to restrict themselves to dissecting the work of long-dead 19th century and early 20th century pioneers such as Melvil Dewey and Paul Otlet, whose racist beliefs undoubtedly overshadowed their classification ideologies and schemes. However, it is not the long dead who today uphold those racist classifications but indeed contemporary LIS and KO practitioners, researchers and institutions. Thus, we argue that the focus of antiracism studies must now squarely turn to our 21st century, not only to critique how contemporary KO systems, structures and institutions continue to uphold the white western hegemonic viewpoints which in turn feed systemic racism, but also to propose and build an alternative.

We seek to identify ways in which the whiteness of KO may be superseded by a truly antiracist ethos. We speculate as to how an antiracist KO might contribute to an amelioration of the effects of structural racism in broader society—for example, by subverting the use of racial classification schemes in critical information literacy instruction. And we endeavour to do this in a multinational rather than a single national context. Our overall aim is to build and support an international coalition of scholars and practitioners, committed to true change on racial equity and justice and to incorporating antiracism content as part and parcel of all curricula and training programmes in LIS and KO schools, research institutes, and professional associations. Our project starts in the present, looks to the future, and is global in scope.

A first step towards our long-term goal is to take stock of the current landscape of anti-racism initiatives in LIS and KO in the countries represented by the authors (France, the UK, and the US) and analyse the facilitators, resistances and obstacles they are met with from our institutions, colleagues and students, and by the wider societies owing to cultural and historical barriers. These three countries also happen to be the main colonial powers whose historic relation with racism tend to set the tone for other countries all over the world, and this paper presents the first stage of our work.

2.0 France: Cultural, Historical and Institutional Barriers to Antiracism Content in Higher Education Institutions

In a 2019 poll, the main student union in France, UNEF, found that 57% of ethnic minority students declared having experienced some form of overt or covert racism from their professors, administrative staff or fellow students. The Union warned that not taking concrete steps to address racism on French campuses hinders the ability of ethnic minority students to accomplish their studies as the impact is very damaging for their mental health and in some extreme cases can even lead to the loss of lives.

In the face of some of the most shocking and highly mediatised cases of overt racism, the Ministry of Higher Education was forced to take some measures. Since 2015, every French HEI is required to create an office for a “referent” (person) in charge of “racism and antisemitism”. An Interministerial Delegation for the Fight against Racism, Anti-Semitism and Anti-LGBT Hate (DILRAH) delivered a report to the French Prime Minister entitled *Plan to Tackle Anti-Semitism and Racism between 2018–2020* where it emphasised the need to reinforce this network of “referents” in French HEIs by making accessible resources, training and national workshops aimed at gathering best practices in partnership with civil associations in order to equip these “referents” to be able to deal effectively with cases of racism and antisemitism. While the intent of this plan is laudable, the reality on the ground is a far cry from the announced goals. No consultation with Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) staff or students was carried out to identify how racism manifests itself and therefore what effective actions can be put in place. The meagre resources allocated to these initiatives and offices are stretched thin over the other types of discriminations and the so-called solutions often emerge from panels and talks with a majority of white “experts”.

In French HEIs, there is a high tolerance for racially derogatory epithets and stereotypes that stigmatise BIPOC by white faculty and staff during official staff meetings. There is often an implicit, and sometimes explicit assumption by white faculty and staff that Black and Arab students will be amongst those failing or not completing their degrees. Hence, these students come into the system facing implicit and explicit racial prejudice, which creates psychological and tangible barriers to their academic pursuits and job opportunities.

In French social sciences and humanities research, publications on “race” made up only 2% of publications between 1960 and 2020, according to a 2020 study by Patrick Simon and Juliette Galonnier cited by Lucie Delaporte (2021). Thus such studies are too rare to warrant the attacks unleashed by the intentional and harmful amalgamation of racism and colonialism studies with “separatism ideology” and terrorism by the French Ministry of Education, echoing the right wing intelligentsia and media pundits. The reality is that academics who venture into racism research do so at their own peril (Delaporte 2021):

“Fabrice Dhume, a sociologist who was for a long time alone in the field of systemic discrimination, confirms: ‘There was a whole period when such work had no place, when it was impossible to make a career working on this subject.’ Those who work on the racial question and those who have been pioneers on these subjects, in a country that is so reluctant to question the dark side of its ‘republican universalism’, have often paid a high price. The work of the sociologist Colette Guillaumin, author in 1972 of *L’Idéologie raciste, genèse et langage actuel*, who was the first in France to study structural racism and the social relations of race, has long been superbly ignored by her peers.”

The few studies that do exist on racism in the French HEIs have tended to focus solely on discrimination against foreign students of African or Muslim origins (Quintero 2013). The subject remains taboo when it comes to the experience of faculty and staff of colour. They are bypassed for nominations to management positions such as department chairs or heads of research units while their less qualified and newer white colleagues are promoted. In short, they become invisible and insignificant even if they are some of the leading experts in their field. Their careers suffer and with it their physical and mental health. Delaporte (2021) describes several cases of isolation and harassment faced by faculty of colour in French HEIs which has driven some of them into exile to other more tolerant western countries.

The “invisibilisation” of systemic racism is compounded by the French State’s avowed colourblindness. Beaman and Petts (2020, 4–5) analyse the hypocrisy of the French State in denying the existence of racialised people while benefiting from their exploitation and subjugation:

“Colorblindness in France dates further back than in the United States; it is found in universalist ideas that predate the French Revolution. These universalist ideals are expressed through French Republican ideology yet belied by the use of racial and ethnic distinctions in prior periods of slavery and colonial rule throughout much of Africa, the Caribbean, and parts of Asia [...]. For example, in Peabody’s *There are No Slaves Here* (1996), she examines how contradictory ideals of freedom and equality existed simultaneously with the slavery in its colonies, so that France could use racialized language and rely on slave labor in its colonies while promoting universalist ideals (including that race does not exist) within the geographical borders of France. [...] In France, colorblindness is inscribed in law—for example, in the forbiddance of collecting ethnic statistics²—yet, there still exists a consciousness of race (or color) [...]”

The absence of national data on the representation of different ethnic groups and their career progression has thus obfuscated any attempt to demonstrate the systemic nature of racism. Despite these institutional, cultural and legal obstacles, individual studies and polls have demonstrated the reality of systemic racism at all levels and sectors of the French society.

An ongoing nationwide survey of discrimination in French HEIs (ACADISCR 2021) is, to the best of our knowledge, the only nationwide survey of racism in HEIs that does not focus solely on students but extends to all HEI levels (management, faculty and administrative staff). However, racial discrimination is bundled up with all the other types of discrimination. Designed as a macro-level sociological survey, there is a risk

² “Ethnic statistics” are prohibited in France by the Data Protection Act of 6 January 1978, although some exceptions are provided for in law under the aegis of the National Commission for Informatics and Liberties (CNIL).

that this survey will not enable a meaningful disaggregation and understanding of the forms and mechanisms of racial discrimination. Finally, this survey relies entirely on the willingness of individual HEIs to participate, so many HEIs may simply opt out.

A third obstacle to the inclusion of antiracism material in LIS and KO degree programmes stems from the structure of French HE degree programmes. Accreditation of the majority of university degrees is centralised by the Ministry of Higher Education and is a totally adisciplinary process, i.e., it is more of a technocratic negotiation between universities and the Ministry of Higher Education to control the number of national degrees awarded by universities. In countries where accreditation of LIS courses is handled by professional bodies such as the ALA in the US or CILIP in the UK, it is possible to argue for the inclusion of antiracism content in degree programmes (see 3.0 and 4.0, below). In France, there is also a historic separation of professional and vocational schools from university degrees. The former were administered mainly by professionals in librarianship and documentation who are not expected to do research or teach in universities. Thus they have little or no interaction with faculty in the dwindling LIS and documentation programmes offered within departments and schools of communication and media studies. While the two remaining library school programmes at the ENSSIB³ and the CNAM⁴ are affiliated with French universities, they have autonomy in their internal functioning and governance. This separation between universities and vocational library schools and the absence of an LIS accreditation body makes it extremely difficult to have a national discussion on the absence of antiracism content in LIS and KO curricula. Thus there is currently no known initiative to incorporate antiracism content into LIS and KO degree programmes in France, and indeed anybody bringing up the topic will likely face attacks and hostility.

3.0 United Kingdom: Racism and Racial Harassment in Higher Education

A 2019 national report from the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC 2019) found that 24% of surveyed BIPOC students said that they had experienced racial harassment since they began their university degree programme. Of those students who had been racially harassed, 56% had experienced “racist name-calling, insults and jokes” (EHRC 2019, 6). Particularly striking is the finding that although “in most cases students said their harasser was another student”, “a large number said it was their tutor or another academic” (6). The problem is not only student-focused; university staff are also affected by racial harassment, with more than half of staff participating in the EHRC study describing incidents of being ignored or excluded because of their race.

In response to the EHRC report and to “decisively tackle racial harassment as part of efforts to address racial inequality in UK higher education” a series of recommendations was published in 2020 by Universities UK (self-described as “the collective voice of

³ <https://www.enssib.fr/>.

⁴ <https://formation.cnam.fr/rechercher-par-discipline/communication-documentation-203003.kjsp>.

140 universities across the UK”). This development is an encouraging start, but to what extent will it support universities to bridge the gap between stated intention and reality? For example, the Universities UK “whole-institution approach” included “reviewing how to create an inclusive, welcoming community and culture by ensuring more diverse curricula” (Universities UK 2020, 10). Such a recommendation for “more diverse curricula” could be interpreted as a call for decolonial, anti-racist knowledge production and knowledge organisation, but without clarification could equally be interpreted as simply representing a range of different, but essentially Eurocentric, perspectives.

In the past decade, there has been a growing agenda—shaped by both protest movements and intellectual debate—to “decolonise the university”, to draw attention to the colonial history of the campus, and how higher education remains in the shadow of that colonialism (Bhambra, Gebrial & Nişancioğlu 2018). If we consider knowledge production and knowledge organisation in relation to this process of confronting the past, we are forced to acknowledge both the actions of the past, and “how the university continues to serve as an arm of the state, perpetuating and hardening borders that facilitate access, circulation and value of white knowledge at the expense of non-white people and our knowledge” (Dar et al. 2021, 697).

LIS as delivered in Higher Education tends to be situated within a broader Social Sciences school or faculty, and the reach of colonialism across the Social Sciences is widely acknowledged in the literature. As Williams et al. (2020, 7) state, “The division of labour amongst the disciplines of the social sciences, for example, follows the distinction between the ‘modern’ world of colonisers (Sociology, Political Science, Economics) and the ‘traditional’ formerly colonised world (Development Studies, Anthropology)”. Although they observe that “much has been done to blur these geographical boundaries, which made sense in the age of empires”, Williams et al. (2020, 7) argue that we are nonetheless 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”.

The education of LIS students is therefore inevitably affected by colonialism on several fronts, whether in the Higher Education environment in which it is studied, in the academic libraries which provide the resources supporting the learning process, or in the libraries and information services in which the students work now and in the future.

In the UK, LIS programmes seeking CILIP accreditation are assessed using the Professional Knowledge and Skills Base (PKSB) tool which “identifies the core knowledge and skills of the profession”, and as part of the process academic departments are expected to show the extent to which each LIS programme and individual module maps on to the PKSB, providing evidence as required. The seven principles of the CILIP *Ethical Framework* (CILIP 2018) are at the centre of the PKSB wheel-based diagram, the first of which is “Human rights, equalities and diversity, and

the equitable treatment of users and colleagues”. This sets an inclusive tone for accreditation, but less evident is the extent to which the individual elements of the framework explicitly require academic departments to focus on the principle in their modules and programmes. For example, the “Advocacy” knowledge/skills area of the PKSBS (which includes the element “Securing opportunities to increase engagement with key messages from target audiences”) could justify the inclusion of classes focusing on libraries’ engagement with, and representation of, BIPOC communities, but a different interpretation of “target audiences” could avoid such communities entirely. Similarly, the “Knowledge Management” section of the PKSBS refers (6) to “Combining and synthesising knowledge from diverse sources to form a coherent whole”, which could be used to justify a CRT approach to knowledge management to “bring forth the voices of racially marginalised groups” and to draw, “not only from traditional repositories”, but from the widest possible range of sources “within the ‘remembrances’ by those on the margins of society” (Morris & Parker 2019, 31). However, it would equally be possible to define “diverse sources” in far narrower and less racially considered terms. In summary, a framework such as the PKSBS *could* be used to justify the inclusion of smaller, isolated equalities or diversity-related elements at the margins of a module, but without explicitly placing diversity at its core, it is difficult to see how it could actively steer LIS departments to do the same in their programme design.

4.0 United States: Hyper-Politicization and Polarization

In the aftermath of the racial justice summer of 2020, most aspects of American society have been hyper-politicized. As a result, the topics of race, justice, and equity have reached the point in 2021 of being the prime focus of an ever expanding list of topics that have swept the nation into an increasingly polarized discourse. The intense politicizing of the current racial divides and the expanding polarization regarding race, along with the centuries-long, unresolved legacy of racism in the US, are not only important to gauge the reality of American life in the broadest context; these dispositions are high impact factors on both knowledge creation more generally as well as the epistemological grounding of LIS more specifically. It is naive to consider that the racial divisions of the moment or the unresolved discords of the past are not deeply woven into the fabric of what we know and how we know it. Americans have continuously been either ill-prepared or unwilling to address race and the inequities that accompany every aspect of race; as such, the LIS discourse reflects, for the most part, the same level of unreadiness.

One of the results of being unprepared for a task at hand is being in a continuous reactive disposition: one of being influenced by circumstance and seldom fully meeting the need(s) of the moment. The “react and respond approach” (RRA) is part of the muscle memory of LIS education and practices. This approach is not an unreasonable strategy; it leads to the sharing of applicable information and new awareness, which are

cornerstones of librarianship as a profession, LIS as a pedagogical enterprise, and iSchools as a branding concept. Using the racial justice summer of 2020 as an example, the reaction is coming out with well-written and even better-branded, race-conscious statements of support; while the response is providing reading lists and speaker programs topical to aspects of racial justice. Yet, RRAs in most instances are:

- Temporary—giving a momentary response to a circumstance, crisis, and/or conversation offering very little opportunity for sustained transitions or transformation.
- Performative—with the new interest accompanied by new awareness, temporary change is camouflaged as actual transformation (a sustained new form or disposition). The performative efforts or “Theatre of the Woke” ends up being the sustained outcome versus actual transformation of attitudes or societal structures.
- Appropriating—in the midst of sharing applicable information and the awareness that follows, what usually happens is that leadership, authority, resource (fiscal and human capital), and social capital remain in the same equitable positions they were in prior to the response to the circumstance, crisis, and/or conversation of the (racial justice) moment. Subsequently, the full appropriation occurs when all aspects of the response become mechanisms to sustain or further entrench.

Additionally, RRAs are not necessarily conducive to knowledge creation as a process towards new knowledge or a broadening of what is true (or personal truths). If we consider knowledge creation in the broadest sense arising from knowledge management, and describing processes, tools, and techniques to provide organizations (domains, disciplines, and/or professional associations) with new knowledge (Nonaka et al. 2006).

There have been concepts, frameworks, and scholarship that have been introduced to both KO via knowledge creation and LIS but not fully explored, or (better stated) not given agency to fully flourish. Yet, in the US, during a time of hyper-divisiveness and in the midst of being misappropriated for political leveraging, Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers one of the few opportunities for developing and curating innovative new knowledge about race and racial justice within LIS (Roberts 2013).

CRT, conceptualized in the 1970s and launched in the 1980s by legal scholars, is well developed to address biases from macro to micro levels as they are embedded within structures such as domains, processes, systems, organizations and professions to offer a more clear context. CRT has evolved from its initial purposes within law, namely to analyze the racial disparities that exist within the US criminal justice system, to bring an empirical application to how (racist) hierarchies influence, impact, and, in many

instances, decimate the lives of those most often disenfranchised. Today CRT is an international tool used within Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Communications, Education, Ethnic Studies, Gender Studies, Queer Studies, Social Work, Sociology, and Information Studies (Fortin 2021; Parker & Roberts 2011).

5.0 Conclusion

As we have seen, the current landscape of antiracism initiatives varies considerably between the three nations presented here, with some striking differences in patterns of racism and racial prejudice, and in the response to attempts made to address these on our campuses and via our curricula. Conversations are more evolved in some contexts than others, but in each case there is an opportunity for knowledge creation. In France, we identified three main obstacles to the inclusion of antiracism material in LIS and KO degree programmes. In the UK, we considered the attempts made to move beyond these barriers via the frameworks and tools tentatively applied to its LIS and KO modules and programmes. In the US, antiracist frameworks and concepts have also been introduced to KO and LIS, somewhat less tentatively, but in all three cases we are still some distance from core, antiracist content in our curricula.

Despite the contextual and educational differences that will always exist between our nations, we are brought together by our shared acknowledgement of the continued impact of the colonial legacy and the whiteness of our university campuses on all those who teach and study there, and of the predominantly reactive approach to eliminating racism in our discipline. Critical Race Theory is one of the shared approaches we can take to do this: as we have seen, CRT offers knowledge creation within LIS, a dual application of the empirical and theoretical. That is, knowledge can be created from a research process that begins with a theory or research inquiry that leads to identifying viable data or evidentiary findings; conversely, the path to new knowledge using CRT can initiate with the empirical and generate a subsequent theoretical position (Crenshaw 2011). Just as importantly, whether starting from an empirical or theoretical position, CRT offers a rigorous scholarly (dual) approach towards knowledge creation within LIS. To add further, this particular new knowledge generated through CRT helps substantiate the existence of inequitable hierarchies that might otherwise remain unknown or unaddressed (Kumasi et al. 2020; Hill Collins 2009).

As a position statement, this paper has explained our approach, and taken an initial cross-country and international perspective on antiracism modules and practices in KO and LIS institutions. This is not an exhaustive perspective, but a first step, and as stated above our aim is to build an international coalition of scholars and practitioners, all working to develop antiracist curricula as standard practice, not as an isolated innovation.

The contribution of our cross-country perspective has multiple benefits. First, it breaks the isolation of colleagues, students and institutions who are facing racism,

hostility and antipathy in their home institutions. Secondly, it signals that our field is facing up to the issue and that an international coalition of scholars are committed to a more just, equitable and diverse field that is inclusive and welcoming to everyone regardless of colour and ethnicity. Thirdly, it enables us to begin to build a global picture of the challenges faced by antiracism teaching and research worldwide, which in turn provides a learning environment for KO and LIS practitioners, students and scholars wishing to engage effectively in this critical topic.

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