

## The 3%: Positive action for positive change

Hong-Anh Nguyen

*The King's Fund, London, UK*

*E-mail: ha.nguyen@kingsfund.org.uk*

In 2019, The King's Fund Library Service in the UK created a positive action graduate traineeship aimed at correcting the lack of ethnic diversity within the library and information profession in the United Kingdom. This commentary, anchored in the critical race theory tenet of counter-narrative, examines the establishment of this post through the lens of critical race theory, providing insight into how white supremacy presents itself in the implementation of anti-racist recruitment practices.

Keywords: Critical race theory, library and information profession, organisational culture, positive action, professional hiring practices, systemic racism

In the UK, 97% of the library and archives workforce identify as white (Hall et al., 2015). Being from a South East Asian background and spending most of my adult life working in libraries, I didn't need that statistic to confirm what I already know from my lived experience. I have worked in 6 libraries over 16 years and for the majority of that time, I have largely existed in a sea of whiteness. If, as Jorge Luis Borges (2009) says, 'Paradise [is] a kind of library', we need to recognise our complicity and power in constructing this paradise. How idyllic can a paradise be if the doors are only open to some and not all? Is a paradise truly that if you do not see yourself reflected in its shimmering gaze?

Critical race theory (CRT) offers an alternative vista: a landscape which is brought to life by many stories, through multiple voices. The counter-narrative tradition in CRT is a tool of resistance, holding up lived experience as valid data on structural racism to shatter 'complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform' (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-narrative helps us to bring to life a polyphonic reality, rather than one which is dominated by Adichie's (2009) 'single story': 'power is the ability to not just tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person'. This commentary is rooted in the CRT counter-narrative tradition, with the aim of enriching the story of anti-racist action in the context of the UK library and information profession.

Whilst the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that rapid change to the foundations of society is possible it has also highlighted what Derrick Bell (1992) calls the 'permanence of racism'. In the UK, the pandemic has thrown racial inequity and injustice into the spotlight, from the disparity in COVID-19 infection and mortality rates (Raleigh & Holmes, 2021; Razai et al., 2021; SAGE, 2022; Suleman et al., 2021), the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes (Ditch the Label, 2021; Grey & Hansen, 2021; Grierson, 2021; Keane, 2021; Protection Approaches, 2020),

to the greater economic vulnerability felt by those in ethnic minority communities (Bowyer, 2020; Platt & Warwick, 2020). The pandemic has also demonstrated the normalisation of racism within the wefts and warps of the fabric of society: that even despite times of crisis and upheaval racism has remained embedded in the roots of our societal structures. That the pandemic has illustrated this so starkly also reflects one of the core tenets of CRT: the persistence of racism as a common experience for those from ethnic minority communities.

In the face of the complex, enduring and insidious nature of systemic racism, how can our profession affect change? Change happens in increments and every step, no matter how small, is an important waypoint towards a level playing field. The small step that The King's Fund Library Service has taken is to introduce a positive action graduate traineeship aimed at people from an ethnic minority background. This post represented a valuable opportunity to not only contribute towards the diversification of the organisation's workforce but also the wider library and information service (LIS) profession. The starkly homogenous nature of the profession in the UK has long been recognised as an issue with multiple initiatives in place such as training and development programmes (CILIP, 2008; Libraries Connected, 2019), professional networks (DILON, 2018; CILIP, 2019a) and targeted conference bursaries (CILIP, 2019b).

In the UK, graduate traineeships are a common route into the library and information profession. They act as fixed-term, paid, entry-level posts which are often a precursor to completing an accredited qualification (CILIP, 2022). Positive action,<sup>1</sup> not to be confused with positive discrimination, refers to initiatives that offer 'training or internships to help certain groups get opportunities or progress at work' (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019) and is a common approach to diversifying professions across multiple sectors (BBC News, 2020; Civil Service Fast Stream, 2022; The Guardian, 2022; Windsor Fellowship, 2021). Positive action posts are legal in the UK when advertised under Section 158 of the Equality Act which makes provision for positive action to "allow measures to be targeted to particular groups, including training to enable them to gain employment, or health services to address their needs. Any such measures must be a proportionate way of achieving the relevant aim" (Equality Act, 2010). Given that graduate traineeships are a recognised development pathway into the profession, there is a strong case to be made for this as a corrective and proportionate training measure.

When advocating for the introduction of our positive action post, it was notable that the moral case alone was not enough to justify corrective action. This is reflected in the way that rhetoric for progress is accompanied by arguments which speak to outcomes outside of social justice. This is exemplified in the McGregor-Smith Review (2017), an independent report on race in the workplace which was commissioned by

---

<sup>1</sup>'Positive action', a term more common in the UK, is synonymous with the US equivalent, 'affirmative action'.

the UK Government. Whilst McGregor-Smith argues that ‘the moral case is just as, if not more, compelling’ than the business case, it is notable just how much the ‘potential benefit to the UK economy from full representation from BME individuals across the labour market’ is vital to the review’s core arguments. The drive towards ethnic diversity for the benefit of capitalism reflects another core tenet of CRT, interest convergence: ‘when demands for reform converge with the self-interest of white elites’ (Warmington, 2018).

The tension inherent in access to social justice which is bounded by dominant white interests also plays out in terms of systemic good versus individual harm. Whilst the ambition of this traineeship is to diversify the LIS talent pool (systemic good) and to provide access to opportunity (individual good), the lived reality has exposed trainees to microaggressions (‘Are you the diversity hire?’) Attention needs to be paid to these unintended consequences of being part of a positive action initiative because the long shadow of the myth of the meritocracy still looms large in British culture.

Whilst speaking of boundaries, it’s also important to acknowledge that the potential for systemic good in posts like this are also limited. Increasing the diversity of the LIS workforce through entry-level positions is a positive step but this also one of the simpler nods towards diversifying the profession. The limitations of entry-level positive action have been reflected in the experience of many similar initiatives within the profession (Dabiri, 2019; Hathcock, 2015; Pang, 2018). The risk inherent in introducing many entry-level opportunities for underrepresented groups is that we start smashing the glass/white ceiling only to find that no-one is sending a ladder down. Support is required beyond the first steps of a graduate traineeship so that progress can be seen beyond the first hurdles towards equality.

If we are speaking of climbing upwards and the resistance that you might feel in your calves whilst climbing, then it would be remiss to not speak of the challenges in implementing a positive action role. In speaking to other libraries who wanted to introduce similar roles, there were some questions that kept on recurring that spoke to this resistance: are positive action posts legal and what to do about any public pushback to the advertising of these posts? The way in which these hurdles materialise is a manifestation of the CRT concept of white supremacy: ‘where the interests of White-identified people are given precedence over the interests of other groups . . . and are maintained and continually recreated by these structures through individual actors and actions (conscious and unconscious)’ (Walton, 2020).

On top of challenges presented internally within organisations, public pushback in response to a positive action post is an additional layer of white supremacy enacted through resistance. The first time we advertised this traineeship we received an email which asked why the post was specifically focused on candidates from an ethnic minority background when men are also underrepresented in the LIS profession. Whilst it is true that men are underrepresented in the profession, with 74% of qualified jobs being held by women, they are disproportionately represented at the more senior levels which has resulted in a gender pay gap of 8.3% (Office for National Statistics,

2019). It is worth noting that this kind of resistance is a micro example of what is enacted on a national scale in the media (Bentley, 2011; Dunne, 2021; Perring, 2016) and harks back to Stuart Hall's (1997, p. 3) interpretation of Mary Douglas' concept of 'matter out of place': 'you don't worry about dirt in the garden because it belongs in the garden but the moment you see dirt in the bedroom you have to do something about it because it doesn't symbolically belong there. And what you do with dirt in the bedroom is you cleanse it, you sweep it out, you restore the order, *you police the boundaries*' (emphasis added). The resistance presented by oppressive structures in response to corrective acts of justice speaks to this policing of boundaries. It nudges us back into our lane, puts us back in our place, neatens the order of things that have been long established.

Amidst the tensions, complexity and contradictions that this commentary has explored, it would be understandable to critically examine the suitability of positive action posts as an anti-racist recruitment practice. Indeed, it may even evoke Audre Lorde's (2019) assertion that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. Positive action posts are not a silver bullet that will solve the problem of systemic racism within the profession. It is common to hear frustration from minoritised communities on mismatch between discourse and action or as the McGregor-Smith Review (2017) says: 'the time for talking is over, now is the time to act'. When the problem is black and white, you expect the solution will be too. In order to bring down the master's house, many tools are needed and attention needs to be paid to the ripples and undercurrents that this work engenders.

## References

- Adichie, C.N. (2009). The danger of a single story. *TED*. [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).
- BBC News. (2020). *Extend in News: a BBC News development initiative for journalists with disabilities*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/careers/trainee-schemes-and-apprenticeships/journalism/extend-news>.
- Bell, D. (1993). *Faces at the bottom of the well: the permanence of racism*. Basic Books.
- Bentley, P. (2011, March 27). Middle-class youngsters barred from applying for internships at Whitehall and in the police ... because they are white. *Daily Mail*. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1370567/Middle-class-youngsters-barred-internships-Whitehall-police-white.html>.
- Borges, J. (2009). *Blindness* (2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed). New Directions.
- Bowyer, G. (2020). *Race inequality in the workforce: analysing the state of play in the coronavirus economy*. Carnegie UK Trust. <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/race-inequality-in-the-workforce-analysing-the-state-of-play-in-the-coronavirus-economy>.
- Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). (2008, April 30). *CILIP council gives go-ahead for positive action trainee scheme*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20090109064217/http://www.cilip.org.uk/aboutcilip/newsandpressreleases/news080430.htm>.
- Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). (2019a, June 26). *CILIP launches new Black Asian and Minority Ethnic Network*. <https://www.cilip.org.uk/news/457988/CILIP-launches-new-Black-Asian-and-Minority-Ethnic-Network.htm>.
- Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). (2019b, April 12). *Launch of CILIP Conference Bursary for BAME professionals*. <https://www.cilip.org.uk/news/446495/Launch-of-CILIP-Conference-Bursary-for-BAME-professionals.htm>.

- Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). (2022). *Graduate traineeships*. [https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/Graduate\\_traineeship](https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/Graduate_traineeship).
- Civil Service Fast Stream. (2022). *Summer diversity internship programme*. <https://www.faststream.gov.uk/summer-diversity-internship-programme/index.html>.
- Dabiri, T. (2019). *Making the record keeping workforce representative: project and literature review*. Archives and Records Association (ARA). [https://www.archives.org.uk/s/ARA\\_literature\\_review\\_version\\_342019-Diversity.pdf](https://www.archives.org.uk/s/ARA_literature_review_version_342019-Diversity.pdf).
- Ditch the Label. (2021). *Uncovered: online hate speech in the Covid era*. <https://www.ditchthelabel.org/research-papers/hate-speech-report-2021>.
- Diversity in Libraries of the North (DILON). (2018, April 9). *Hello from DILON*. <https://libdiverse.wordpress.com/2018/04/09/hi-from-dilon>.
- Dunne, J. (2021, June 20). BBC in discrimination row after opening trainee role only to ethnic minorities. *Evening Standard*. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/bbc-discrimination-row-advertising-job-ethnic-minorities-b941600.html>.
- Equality Act (2010). <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/notes/division/3/11/2/1>.
- Equality and Human Rights Commission. (2019). *Employers: what is positive action in the workplace?* <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/employers-what-positive-action-workplace>.
- Hall, H., Irving, C., Ryan, B., Raeside, R., Dutton, M., & Chen, T. (2015). *A study of the UK information workforce: mapping the library, archives, records, information management and knowledge management and related professions in the United Kingdom*. Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and Archives and Records Association (ARA). <https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/Workforcesurvey>.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Race, the floating signifier: featuring Stuart Hall: transcript*. Media Education Foundation. <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Race-the-Floating-Signifier-Transcript.pdf>.
- Hathcock, A. (2015). White librarianship in blackface: diversity initiatives in LIS. *In The Library With The Lead Pipe*, 7 October 2015. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/lis-diversity>.
- Grey, C., & Hansen, K. (2021). Did COVID-19 lead to an increase in hate crimes towards Chinese people in London? *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 37(4), 569-588. doi: 10.1177/10439862211027994.
- Grierson, J. (2020, May 31). Anti-Asian hate crimes up 21% in UK during coronavirus crisis. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/13/anti-asian-hate-crimes-up-21-in-uk-during-coronavirus-crisis>.
- Keane, F. (2021, May 3). *Asian hate crime in UK increases during pandemic*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-56937299>.
- Lorde, A. (2019). The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. In A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*. Penguin Books.
- Libraries Connected. (2019, August 29). New project to tackle lack of diversity in library leadership announced. *Libraries Connected*. <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/news/new-project-tackle-lack-diversity-library-leadership>.
- Office for National Statistics. (2019). *Gender pay gap explorer*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/genderpaygapexplorer/2019-06-07>.
- McGregor-Smith, R. (2017). *Race in the workplace: the McGregor-Smith review*. Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/race-in-the-workplace-the-mcgregor-smith-review>.
- Pang, K. (2018, August 3). 96.7 shades of white. *UKSG eNews*. [https://www.uksg.org/sites/default/files/upload/2018-09/Editorial427\\_0.pdf](https://www.uksg.org/sites/default/files/upload/2018-09/Editorial427_0.pdf).
- Perring, R. (2016, May 14). BBC bans white people from job – but workforce already reflects country's ethnic make up. *Daily Express*. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/670266/BBC-advert-white-people-ethnic-equality-staff-job-internship>.
- Platt, L., & Warwick, R. (2020). COVID-19 and ethnic inequalities in England and Wales. *Fiscal Studies: The Journal of Applied Public Economics*, 41(2), 259-289. doi: 10.1111/1475-5890.12228.

- Protection Approaches. (2020). *Covid-related hate: East and South East Asian communities' experiences of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic*. <https://protectionapproaches.org/covid-related-hate>.
- Raleigh, V., & Holmes, J. (2021, September 17). *The health of people from ethnic minority groups in England*. The King's Fund. <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/health-people-ethnic-minority-groups-england#covid-19>.
- Razai, M.S., Kankam, H.K.N., Majeed, A., Esmail, A., & Williams, D. (2021). Mitigating ethnic disparities in COVID-19 and beyond. *The BMJ*, 372, m4921. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m4921.
- Rees, P.H., Wohland, P., Norman, P., & Boden, P. (2012). Ethnic population projections for the UK, 2001–2051. *Journal of Population Research*, 29(1), 45-89. doi: 10.1007/s12546-011-9076-z.
- Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). (2022, May 13). *COVID-19 ethnicity subgroup: interpreting differential health outcomes among minority ethnic groups in wave 1 and 2, 24 March 2021*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-ethnicity-subgroup-interpreting-differential-health-outcomes-among-minority-ethnic-groups-in-wave-1-and-2-24-march-2021/covid-19-ethnicity-subgroup-interpreting-differential-health-outcomes-among-minority-ethnic-groups-in-wave-1-and-2-24-march-2021>.
- Solórzano, D.G., & Yosso, T.J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytic framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 4(8), 23-44. doi: 10.1177/2F107780040200800103.
- Suleman, M., Sonthalia, S., Webb, C., Tinson, A., Kane, M., Bunbury, S., Finch, D., & Bibby, J. (2021). *Unequal pandemic, fairer recovery: the COVID-19 impact inquiry report*. The Health Foundation. <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/unequal-pandemic-fairer-recovery>.
- The Guardian. (2022). *Positive action scheme*. <https://workforus.theguardian.com/index.php/entry-level-opportunities/positive-action-scheme/>.
- Walton, S. (2020). Why the critical race theory concept of 'White supremacy' should not be dismissed by neo-Marxists: Lessons from contemporary Black radicalism. *Power and Education*, 12(1), 78-94. doi: 10.1177/1757743819871316.
- Warmington, P. (2018). Critical race theory in England: Impact and opposition. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 27(1), 20-37. doi: 10.1080/1070289X.2019.1587907.
- Windsor Fellowship. (2021). *House of Commons BAME internship*. <https://www.windsor-fellowship.org/house-of-commons-internship-programme>.