

**Paper title:** *Impact of the Non-Inclusive Organisation on the Delivery of Socially Inclusive Public Services*

**Conference track:** Organisation and delivery of human services

Accepted April 2009 subject to revision: FINAL version

**Author details**

Ms Kerry Wilson  
Senior Lecturer: Centre for Cultural Leadership  
Liverpool John Moores University  
Art and Design Academy  
2 Duckinfield Street  
Liverpool  
L3 5RD  
UK  
[k.m.wilson@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:k.m.wilson@ljmu.ac.uk)  
00 44 (0)151 904 1147

# Impact of the *Non-Inclusive Organisation* on the Delivery of Socially Inclusive Public Services

## Abstract

This paper discusses tensions between the *non*-inclusive leadership and management of public service organisations and their attempts to contribute to social inclusion policy agendas. Using the public library service in England as a case study, the paper presents a recent two-year empirical study, *'The Right 'Man' for the Job? The role of empathy in community librarianship'*, conducted at the University of Sheffield, UK and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) 2006-08. The project investigated library staff attitudes towards social inclusion policy and disadvantaged groups in society, exploring the relationship between their own social and cultural identities, and their capacity to make an effective, empathic contribution to social inclusion objectives. Selected key findings are discussed, including the impact of local government 'tick box' culture on policy effectiveness and staff engagement, and issues relating to staff awareness, development and subsequent role strain amongst a predominantly white female middle-aged homogenised workforce. The paper demonstrates that a fully inclusive and participative society cannot be realistically achieved by ambiguous policy directives and without the full endorsement of appropriately recruited, trained, and *included* public service sector staff.

## Introduction – the research context

The term social *exclusion* became prominent in political dialogue in the UK during the 1990s, as an alternative or more suitable definition of poverty, or social and economic inequality in a policy context (Walker and Walker, 1997). It came to represent not only low material or economic means, but alienation from mainstream society, and 'the inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life' (Duffy, 1995, quoted in Walker and Walker, 1997, pp. 8). Although by no means a new political concept, social exclusion gained momentum in terms of UK social policy with the start of New Labour's term of office in 1997, and the inception of the Social Exclusion Unit (now Social Exclusion Task Force), who defined the concept as such:

*'a short hand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown'* (described in renewal.net, 2002).

As policy has subsequently shifted towards the social responsibility of public services in tackling the causes of social disadvantage, policy makers have put a positive spin on the agenda by focusing on social *inclusion* rather than exclusion (Hills et al, 2002). Levitas (2005) links changing semantics in the social exclusion agenda to New Labour discourse and the development of 'third way' politics, including democratic ideals of civil, political and social equality. This in turn has encouraged greater accountability in public services with respect to accessibility, service standards, performance indicators and the need to prove social value and impact (Percy-Smith,

2000). The Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS, 1999) published guidelines for public library services in response to national social inclusion policy and objectives, entitled *Libraries for All*. The report recommends that social inclusion be mainstreamed as a policy priority within all library and information services, and that libraries should be developed as community resource centres in consultation with socially excluded groups.

Previous research in the sector had focused upon the *potential* contribution of public libraries to inclusion objectives from an advocacy perspective, with sporadic examples of impact on project and individual library authority bases. The 'Right Man' project was perceived at the point of design to fill a gap in the field by exploring staff *attitudes* towards public policy objectives, the expectations placed on them to contribute and their capacity to *empathise* within increasingly diverse public service encounters. The role of empathy in service provision, and quality and impact of service interactions, has been widely studied in professional service sectors. Flanagan et al (2005) considered the role of empathy in customer service within the police force, with particular relevance to building customer confidence in communicating with the service. Familiarity was found to be a key influencer of confidence, including the extent to which personnel know and are known by the community. Rogers et al (1994), in their study of front-line service personnel, state that empathy is one of five dimensions used to evaluate service quality: the study revealed that the more empathic employees are to both customers and colleagues, the less work-related tension and stress they experience.

In a study of empathy towards people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, Wang et al (2003) recommend the development of an occupational empathic multicultural awareness tool to inform the recruitment and professional development of education professionals. Mann (1997) however criticises any attempt to 'control' the real emotions of employees, in what is described as emotional labour, as this can have dysfunctional effects on both the individual and the organisation. This suggests that in a service profession where inter-cultural encounters are likely to take place, staff with a genuine capacity for empathic concern may have the most effective outcome and facilitate the most positive perceptions and customer evaluation of their employing organisations, thus validating the need to consider and accommodate the social and cultural identities of staff in human resource management and development strategies.

## **Research Methodology**

A variety of research methods were applied when undertaking the project. For the purposes of this paper, selected findings emerging from the following two main primary data collection activities are presented. A postal survey was conducted in Autumn 2006, during which 1100 questionnaires were distributed to a stratified sample of 90 public library authorities in total within and across the nine English regions. A total of 453 completed questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 41% and a statistically viable sample. The specific aims and objectives of the survey were to provide a statistical profile of staff social and cultural demographics and the development of quantitative measures of professional empathy according to demographic variables, exploring: staff attitudes towards the community role for the public library; staff attitudes towards socially excluded groups; staff attitudes towards

professional roles and responsibilities in addressing exclusion. To achieve this aim, the *Professional Empathy* measure was developed– please see the full report (Wilson and Birdi, 2008) for details.

Qualitative fieldwork was undertaken in Spring-Summer 2007 to investigate in greater detail the extent of staff participation (including willingness to become involved) in social inclusion policy implementation and the effects of internal politics, including communication, training and ‘professional inclusion’ upon attitudes towards social inclusion policy, testing the theory that an inclusive organisation facilitates an inclusive service, amongst other conditions and tensions. This was achieved via a series of focus groups with frontline staff and interviews with senior managers. A total number of 33 members of frontline staff took part, and telephone interviews were undertaken with 10 senior managers, using the same semi-structured research instrument used in the focus group sessions to provide comparable data. All were recorded and fully transcribed.

### **Summary of selected key findings**

#### *Social and cultural identities of service sector staff*

The increased accountability of publicly funded organisations in demonstrating social impact has previously raised issues over cultural diversity and social representation in the public library workforce: Pateman (2002) notes the ‘failure’ of public library leaders in the UK to reflect race and *class* in their equal opportunity statements and their staff recruitment, development and service improvement strategies, and the failure of public library services to reflect the diversity of their communities. Unfortunately the ‘Right Man’ survey did little to dispute this claim: with respect to gender, age and ethnicity, the sample was strikingly homogenous. The most frequent gender/age/ethnicity grouping for example was ‘female + 46-55 + White-British’, with 32.7% of the sample belonging to a female White-British middle-aged category. Indicators of secondary school experience were used to explore experiences of different cultures in respondents’ formative years: 76.8% of the sample described the profile of their school(s) as *culturally homogenous*, and three quarters of the sample described their schools’ educational performance as good-excellent, indicating the majority attended achieving schools.

Focus group and interview respondents were asked to comment on the homogeneity of our survey sample, and whether or not this raises issues for the provision of socially inclusive library services. Participants were mostly in agreement that the survey sample was an accurate depiction of public library staff demographics. Perceived barriers to appointing culturally diverse employees included inflexible centralised recruitment policies and the discouraging ‘middle England’ image of the sector. The general perception however was that staff profiles in individual authorities reflected that of the communities they serve, and that generally, authorities seemed to have a ‘make do’ attitude towards equal opportunities and cultural diversity in the workplace:

“I can only speak for the library service and that is 100% white, reasonably middle class, quite diverse in age and over-whelmingly female”

“... we have a member of staff with a hearing impairment who seems to be held up as a shining example of equal opps”

Participants were divided on whether or not such a homogenous workforce had implications for the delivery of socially inclusive services, with opinion shaped by personal identity and experience. Defensive comments were made by some respondents, who claimed that staff are capable of empathy irrespective of their own cultural background, and that the ability to deliver socially inclusive services is dependant upon skill and personality traits rather than identity.

“... in our defence I would say that pretty much all of the ladies that I have met and had the privilege to work with have been fantastically welcoming, open-minded, flexible... its easy to throw the charge against us that we're all middle-aged middle class white women but I'm sorry I can't help that... I do what I'm doing and I try to do it as well as I can”

Those who disagreed thought the homogenous profile would have a negative impact from a user perspective: there was an assumption that people may have a sense of ‘not belonging’ if their profile differed from that of the service environment. One participant observed that members of vulnerable and traditionally disadvantaged groups place a greater degree of trust in people they can recognise as familiar:

“In my own experience of doing work with disadvantaged community groups, they are far more responsive to people whom they trust to be from their own world, with the same accent, the same colloquialisms, somebody they can relate to... Most of these projects are about building confidence, and there needs to be that element of trust. I'm not saying that the stereotypical white female middle class librarian wouldn't be able to do my job as well as I can, but I think they would have to work at it a bit harder to get over that initial barrier”

The project sought to explore and subsequently make explicit some of the more subtle, idiosyncratic conditions in workforce representation and cultural diversity, including the less prescribed indicators of representation such as gender, social class, and regional or vernacular dimensions of identity. The previous quote indicates some understanding of such subtleties, but on the whole, cultural diversity and representation was instinctively associated with race and ethnicity, and other more prescribed inclusion agendas.

### *Policy misinterpretation and ‘tick box’ organisational cultures*

The research further explored what organisational tensions and conditions exist in enabling such a culturally and demographically homogenous workforce to deliver empathic socially inclusive services. The misinterpretation and miscommunication of policy rationale and objectives was a key finding. There is considerable confusion and blurring between social inclusion and other social and public policy remits including community cohesion, racial equality, disability discrimination, sexual equality and other anti-discrimination objectives. It was felt that more high profile legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) generated higher levels of awareness and engagement through necessity:

“I think access is the one that most staff are aware of really... when DDA came in, person after person rang me up about access and the legislation coming in, so we ended up *having* to understand the nitty gritty of the policy, otherwise I'd be standing there saying “I don't know about that” when people expect me to know, and you've got to be able to answer people's complaints.”

The influence of political climate and local government culture has a strong impact on interpretations of and responses to social inclusion policy within public libraries. Library staff are highly conscious of the political circumstances in which they operate, and this can encourage a certain cynicism or apprehension when thinking about their contribution to social inclusion objectives. Short-term funding and questionable council motives are key issues:

“...a lot of the work with refugees and asylum seekers especially is such a political football so much that funding will change as to which way the wind blows that week... in relation to the media, politicians... there’s a lot of short-termism”

It was felt that equality and inclusion agendas are too easily manipulated in order to achieve targets. This forms some explanation for the theoretical blurring between social inclusion policy and other equality-based agendas, and serves to encourage higher levels of cynicism and lower morale amongst staff:

“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... ‘give me the money’”

Linked to this respondents described a certain ‘ticking boxes and jumping hoops’ culture within local government, which makes public library staff suspicious of organisational motivation in meeting the social inclusion agenda. There is a sense that authority chiefs create a superficial and cosmetic atmosphere for staff, particularly when correlating inclusion objectives to service standards and awards:

“...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”

#### *Front-line staff consultation and inclusion – practising what we preach?*

The lack of awareness of and engagement with policy objectives was another cause for concern. Conversations with front-line staff revealed extremely low levels of awareness and engagement with social inclusion policy amongst this grouping, both in terms of the wider political agenda, and its interpretation and administration at micro local level. The reasons cited included a lack of communication and transparency within individual authorities, and a working culture that dictates certain roles and responsibilities within and across organisational hierarchies, i.e. some front-line respondents did not think it was ‘their job’. There is also a certain contradiction at play 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 face-to-face service. They were also described however as the least important staff grouping in terms of needing to know and understand policy and related political objectives:

“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”

A perceived lack of inclusion and consultation was a real issue for respondents: in some cases inclusion objectives were seen to be presented as top-down ‘fait accompli’ directives, which is particularly objectionable where the operational reality is seen as

flawed or unachievable. This is especially true for front-line staff, and the apparent contradiction within their roles mentioned previously. Some felt that their knowledge of library users and communities in providing day-to-day services was not fully taken advantage of, and not adequately translated into policy and service design:

“Where is that structure for consulting front-line staff... It’s just ‘today this happens’ and you don’t know where it’s come from, yet we’re the people the customers see... According to them we’re responsible for everything little thing that goes on... But at the end of the day I have agreed to work for the public library and I am agreeing to these policies by proxy, and that’s where the frustration comes in. Once I’ve signed the contract I become the face of these policies, but then I think, ‘hold on a minute, nobody asked me’”

The need for greater organisational inclusion, communication, transparency and commitment is made greater by the changing role expectations placed on staff within inclusive agendas. When discussing work with traditionally excluded groups and communities, it became apparent that not all (existing) library staff considered themselves to be suitably trained or qualified for the role. This was particularly evident for example during conversations about working with children from disadvantaged areas, or disaffected young people, which encourages indifference from staff and other library users towards this group, and in more serious cases towards the social inclusion agenda as a whole:

“... after a couple of bad experiences with young people recently... after last Saturday I was ready to come in here and tell you exactly what I thought of social inclusion”

“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?”

## **Conclusion**

The research has revealed a number of organisational tensions and conditions in providing socially inclusive public services, each directly related to the need to apply the principle of inclusion itself to strategic and operational practices. The researchers by no means sought to undermine the often valuable and instrumental role of public libraries in contributing to social inclusion policy – the final report includes several case study examples of good practice in this area, relating to specific projects or initiatives and their management and delivery. It is also worth noting that some individual UK library authorities are undertaking exemplary practice in workforce representation and policy education. The research complements previous studies of the instrumental role of public libraries to public policy and civic life in both the UK and Australia (Greenhalgh et al, 1995; Bird and Akerman, 2005; Hillenbrand, 2005; Oxley, 2005; Fincher and Iveson, 2008) by exposing the organisational conditions on which such outcomes depend, helping to ultimately avoid accusations of mere rhetoric in relation to the contribution of the service.

In terms of having the right ‘man’ for the job in providing inclusive and empathic public library services, recommendations were made concerning the need to diversify considerably the national workforce and encourage young entrants to the sector; the need to define and action more appropriately the services’ *realistic* contribution to social inclusion objectives and where that contribution fits with wider local authority and service provider agendas; the need to reconsider and develop recruitment policies

for community roles, removing any professional bar; compulsory advanced education and training in social inclusion policy and practice, particularly amongst front-line staff charged with community-based roles; improved internal communication and consultation procedures; and the need to evaluate and develop extended collaborative service networks. Until these objectives are met, and the service fully and cohesively understands what social inclusion means in both policy and practice, the sector will find it extremely difficult to demonstrate consistent social value and impact.

## References

- Bird, V. and Akerman, R. (2005) Every which way we can: a literacy and social inclusion position paper. National Literacy Trust. Available from: <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/socialinclusion/policychallenge.html#Every>
- DCMS (1999). Libraries for All: Social Inclusion in Public Libraries. Policy guidance for local authorities in England, Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Available from: [http://www.dcms.org.uk/global/publications/archive\\_1999/](http://www.dcms.org.uk/global/publications/archive_1999/)
- Fincher, R. And Iveson, K. (2008) Planning and Diversity in the City: Redistribution, Recognition and Encounter. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Flanagan, P., Johnston, R and Talbot, D. (2005). "Customer confidence: the development of a "pre-experience" concept." International Journal of Service Industry Management 16(4): 373-384.
- Greenhalgh, L., Worpole, K. and Landry, C. (1995). Libraries in a World of Cultural Change. London, UCL Press.
- Hillenbrand, C. (2005) "Public Libraries as Developers of Social Capital" APLIS 18 (1) 4-12.
- Hills, J., Le Grand, J. and Piachaud, D. (eds) (2002). Understanding Social Exclusion. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Levitas, R. (2005) The inclusive society? Social Exclusion and New Labour. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mann, S. (1997) "Emotional Labour in Organisations" Leadership and Organization Development Journal 18 (1): 4-12
- Oxley, C. (2005) Libraries Building Communities: The Vital Contribution of Victoria's Public Libraries – A Research Report for the Library Board of Victoria and the Victorian Public Library Network. Available from: [http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/about/information/publications/policies\\_reports/plu\\_lbc.html](http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/about/information/publications/policies_reports/plu_lbc.html)
- Pateman, J. (2002). "Reasons to be Wrathful." Library Management 23(1/2): 17-22.
- Percy-Smith, J. ed. (2000) Policy Responses to Social Exclusion: towards inclusion? Maidenhead, Open University Press.

Renewal.net (2002). Tackling Exclusion, Social Exclusion Unit. Available from: <http://www.renewal.net/Nav.asp?Category=:neighbourhood+renewal:tackling+exclusion>

Rogers, J. D., Clow, K.E. and Kash, T.J. (1994). "Increasing Job Satisfaction of Service Personnel." *Journal of Services Marketing* 8(1): 14-26.

Walker, A. and Walker, C. (eds) (1997). *Britain Divided: The growth of social exclusion in the 1980s and 1990s*. London, Child Poverty Action Group.

Wang, Y., Davidson, M., Yakushko, O.F., Savoy, H.B., Tan, J.A. and Bleier, J.K. (2003) "The scale of ethnocultural empathy: development, validation and reliability" *Journal of Counselling Psychology* 50 (2): 221-234

Wilson, K. and Birdi, B. (2008) *The Right 'Man' for the Job? The role of empathy in community librarianship*. The University of Sheffield for the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Full research report available from: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/07/85/14/AHRC%202006-8%20final%20report%2004.08.pdf>