THE DIVERSITY DISCUSSION: WHAT ARE WE SAYING?

by Lisa Hussey

The diversity discussion in LIS has been going on for decades. There is a plethora of literature, both scholarly and practice based, on the need for diversity and steps to introduce it into the professions. The plans, suggestions, and programs include a wide variety of approaches, including hiring guidelines, scholarships for graduate students, fellowship programs for recent graduates, diversity committees at institutions levels, mentoring programs, community outreach, and many other suggestions and practices. The professional LIS organizations have all made commitments to improve diversity, began programs, and instituted policies to support these commitments. The importance of diversity and the commitment to the process is clearly demonstrated in the literature, in monetary commitments for programs and scholarships, and in the espoused values of LIS organizations and institutions.

However, in spite of all the discussion about diversity, the LIS professions have, at best, shown incremental improvements in diversification. The obvious question is: Why? Why, in spite of the commitments, the discussion, and the various initiatives, has there been so little improvement? Why is diversity still a problem to solve rather than a way of being in LIS? Why are we still struggling with how to truly integrate diversity into the profession?

These are complex questions that cannot be answered easily. Rather than review the numerous and varied initiatives and programs, perhaps a better starting point is to consider how LIS as a profession approaches diversity and the rhetoric and terminology used to describe the process and the intended outcomes. From this view, the question is not why are we lagging with diversity, but what are we trying to achieve? What influences the construction and descriptions of these programs? What are the stated and intended outcomes? Once these questions are considered and the answers, or lack of answers, are analyzed, we as a profession may be able to recognize some of the underlying influences that drive the diversity discussion and help to maintain the status quo. For example, what words or terminology are used in the diversity discussion? How does word choice influence the direction and impact of programs and initiatives?

Words have meanings beyond accepted definitions and uses. "Words have consequences…they symbolize something beyond themselves, they do so by *convention*, and they are *public*" (Searle, 66). To put it another way, words have power and how they are used can increase their influence and

impact. The words used to introduce and describe diversity initiatives and programs provide the framework of expectations and reveal the cultural and/or hegemonic influences guiding and shaping the ultimate outcomes. When dissecting meaning and analyzing word choice, perhaps the best place to begin is with the term diversity as the catchall term for issues related to and programs focused on differences and is a "term used widely, often without consideration for its meaning and roots" (Peterson (b) 21). While there is a large selection of literature on diversity, there is little discussion to explain exactly how diversity is defined, and whether it is defined the same way every time. The term is generally used as if there is an accepted universal definition. However diversity is simultaneously a nebulous, vague, and extensive idea. It can imply difference regarding uncomfortable concepts, such as race, religion, ethnic heritage, and sexual orientation; but it can also refer to more benign differences, including variety in musical tastes and hobbies. In fact, given that diversity is such a broad notion, it may not be possible to definitely define the concept universally. However, within LIS, there are some common ideas and definitions of diversity.

One of the most common uses of diversity is as a method for acknowledging differences among people with a particular emphasis on the inclusion of librarians of color especially of the "four protected minority categories recognized by the U.S. Equal Opportunity Act: African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian American, and Native American" (Adkins & Espinal 53). This definition has widespread, tacit acceptance within LIS as most diversity initiatives are specifically aimed at individuals who are members of one of the four ethnic classifications. This is clearly illustrated by the Spectrum Scholarships from the American Library Association (ALA) and the Career Enhancement Program (CEP) from the Association of Research Libraries (ARL).

The Spectrum Scholarship, established in 1997, is designed to "address the specific issue of under-representation of critically needed ethnic librarians within the profession while serving as a model for ways to bring attention to larger diversity issues in the future" (ALA). Spectrum's website encourages the recruitment of new professionals from "underrepresented groups" (ALA). ARL's uses similar language to describe their CEP program. The intended outcome is "to provide practical experience to MLIS graduate students from underrepresented groups and to create a diverse research library community that will better meet the challenges of changing demographics and the emphasis of global perspectives in higher education" (ARL). Both programs use broad terminology, such as underrepresented and ethnic to describe potential applicants. On the overview page, ALA uses more explicit language to define eligible applicants as "librarians of color… American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander" (ALA). 'Librarians of color' is a phrase used often to describe diverse librarians. The phrase, which strongly connects the idea of diversity to race, does not add anything to the conversation other than to highlight the fact that diversity involves 'others.' The CEP requires that applicants "be a member

of a racial/ethnic minority group as described by the U.S. Census Bureau," the same classifications as used by ALA. In both programs, diversity is defined in terms of representation based on ethnic and racial background This understanding of diversity, while well intended, has the potential of creating a process based on visual diversity; one that highlights difference based characteristics such as skin color and facial features, one that often relegates diverse ethnic groups into broad, all-encompassing classifications that downplay or ignore unique attributes and rich histories associated with each subgroup. The U.S. Census classifications (African American, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American) are broad terms that fail to express the vast variety of language, custom, and culture. For example, Asian American refers to individuals with ethnic backgrounds from a large geographical area, ranging from the Middle East to Japan, each with different languages, religions, cultures, and worldviews. Yet, the classification 'Asian American' groups them all together as one cohesive group. It is an approach based in simplicity rather than dealing with the complexity of difference. "It is simply more efficient to be aware of group members' common histories and experiences than to discover every element about each organizational member" (Grimes, 400).

Much of the LIS literature uses the broad, abstract idea of diversity. As Christine Pawley (2006) points out, in LIS we are happy to address the idea of diversity, however it is defined, but LIS rarely deals with issues of race. This is supported by a recent search in the *Library Literature* database where 'race' as a keyword returned 408 results in comparison to 1295 for multicultural/multiculturalism and 1702 for diversity (divers*). There are many possibilities for this discrepancy including the popular practice of using more politically correct terms, such as diversity. However, it is also likely due to the fact that discussions of race are complicated and often uncomfortable for people hesitant to point out differences. Diversity is safer term, a "palatable word for an idea that is unappetizing to many – the idea that people are different from one another and we should celebrate the differences." (Kniffel 32). However, "without a clear and intellectually rigorous understanding of race as perhaps the major components of multiculturalism [and diversity] we fail in our research and teaching to go beyond" the palatable, abstract and unthreatening concept of difference. (Pawley 153). Diversity without the discussion of race relations and their history in our society and in the LIS professions only provides a façade of change.

Diversity is not the only commonly used word within the discussion. Another often used term to consider is 'difference.' While the focus of diversity is generally on ethnic and racial groups, the discussion about diversity is often about difference and how difference can help the organization and/or the profession. To speak of diversity is to imply a commitment to difference, without explicitly defining the difference, or what the differences are compared against. The term 'underrepresented groups' provides an image of people who want to be a part of an organization, but who are not included. It offers no explanation as to why these groups are underrepresented. The

commitment implied is only for representation, not addressing issues as to why these groups are not represented within the profession.

Diversity and difference are ambiguous terms that fail to address the history of discrimination and race relations in the United States and within social institutions, such as libraries, archives, and other information centers. "If the language makes no distinctions among differences, the legacy of segregation, discrimination, and oppression can be denied." (Peterson (b), 31). Diversity, in this context, focuses on a superficial integration of difference, but does not deal with the long history of racial tensions in the United States. Defining diversity as merely a surface or visual difference means true differences can be chalked up as merely minor physical or philosophical differences and the true cost resulting from a lack of diversity will be treated as unimportant.

The central role of 'difference' in the discussion provides a subtle insight into the complexity of diversity. The concepts of diversity, multiculturalism, and race are not limited to members of the U.S. Census classifications (African American, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American) or librarians of color. All three concepts also include majority or white culture. The influence of white culture in the diversity process should not be ignored or minimized. "[W]hen whiteness is accepted as an invisible norm…white people, their assumptions, and ways are empowered" (Grimes 382). However, as with race, the role of white culture in LIS is rarely directly addressed, which can have a powerful effect. "[T]o ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it" (Roediger 6). The focus on a broad spectrum of difference rarely acknowledges the advantages inherent in being part of the majority culture, or white culture, a concept known as 'white privilege.' White privilege has been discussed and researched in a variety of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, political science, and to some degree, LIS (Peterson (b), Lipsitz). In framing these discussions, the authors often define white privilege within the context of racism as most discussions of race relations include an underlying assumption of "hierarchical relations between blacks and whites," (Guess 657) where whites are higher on the hierarchy.

This unequal standing is reflected in the use of 'diversity' as the identification and celebration of difference, often done with tacit or unconscious assumptions regarding the standards for measuring difference. In order to identify difference, one must first decide on a standard for what is not different or what is *normal*. Who or what acts as the standard against which all others are compared? In LIS, as with most American social institutions, the answer is that the practices, values, and culture associated with white ethnic groups act as the basis for defining difference (Dovidio 52). However, rather than state this basis for comparison, discussions of diversity focus on the groups identified as different, which assumes a common understanding of 'not different.' The failure to address this assumption, that acts as a fundamental basis for diversity programs and initiatives, results in an increase in its influence. "Difference is a justice, dignity, and equity issue –

a point too many multiculturalists fail to make" (Peterson (b) 31). Instead, diversity is often wrapped up in broad, easy to accept terms, which create a "humanly impoverished notion of diversity, excluding personality, social class, spirituality, taste and private passions" (Cronin 40), that ignores past actions. When past issues of racial discrimination and ethnic oppression are minimized to underrepresentation of certain groups and the inclusion of librarians of color, the roles of white culture and white privilege are not addressed. As a result, one may end up with a diversity program where "difference is celebrated at a superficial level, but white people and their ways are implicitly presented as more 'normal' or more important" (Grimes 389) and the impact of historical racism and current inequality are minimized.

Race, like all socially constructed concepts, has evolved as society has evolved, and the resulting racism is in essence "to be nothing but the friction between different groups of people" (DuBois (a) 10) where one group has more power and influence than others. This power struggle between races has a long history in the United States and social institutions, such as libraries, archives and museums, are influenced by this history. In LIS, as in the wider American society, we often "adopt the values of society," many of which "reflect racist traditions" (Dovidio 52). However, racism as the overt discrimination and degradation of others is no longer the main concern or cause of issues related to racial issues in the professions and the work place. In its place is a more subtle and nebulous process of discrimination, a new form of racism that is usually institutionalized and often presented as rational arguments against minority enhancement policies. New racism, also referred to as symbolic racism, modern racism, or racial resentment, is characterized by a focus on the individual rather than the group – i.e. individuals not taking advantage of opportunities, individuals not working up to potential rather than groups being unable to improve based on the power and influence of other groups, such as whites. This view allows whites/majority culture to assuage their guilt over privilege by denying the existence of privilege by highlighting the importance on individual accomplishment and the idea that anyone can succeed as long as they try hard enough. "Overemphasizing individuality allows the importance of group issues to be ignored…such a focus implies that fairness to individuals is all that matters" (Grimes 400). There is no need to make accommodations for particular groups if the expectation is that everyone is evaluated and judged on their individual accomplishments. It is a view that assumes that everyone begins at the same point, with the same opportunities. It does not, however, address racial inequities in essential social foundations, such as education and basic health care (Lipsitz 6), which then allows members of white culture to "both deny the experience and privileges they enjoy because of their group status and attribute their success solely to individual effort" (Grimes 400). Instead of questioning existing power structures and policies that implicitly favor those who begin with advantages bestowed by white privilege, those "who conceive of racism in individual terms may be more in favor of instituting individual-level interventions like diversity management training programs

that attempt to change individuals' attitudes and beliefs" (Unzueta & Lowery 1496). The changes that result are generally superficial and do little to address the policies and practices that reinforce white privilege.

There is, however, research and discussion regarding white privilege and its influence on organizations and social institutions. When including the concept of white privilege, the framework and outlook of diversity is changed. Within this framework, racism, as traditionally represented as overt actions and blatant discrimination, is not the main issue in dealing with diversity. Rather, it requires looking below the surface at the more subtle influences, such as institutionalized practices and tacit acceptance of white culture as the basis for 'normal.' It also requires those participating in the process to consider and question the "othered status, that is the non-white status in America's racial hierarchy" (Guess 649) and how this perception of race relations shapes and influences diversity initiatives and programs. In other words, it begins to consider power and power structures in society. Within the diversity discussion, it is important to think beyond just difference and skin color and recognize the role of power. "Race and racism are matters of interests as well as attitudes" (Lipsitz 3). Those individuals and groups with the most power and influence do not want to surrender it. Diversity can be seen as a threat to established structures of authority and influence. "If diversity were as non-threatening a concept as the rhetoric of difference would lead us to believe, then expressions of anger would not occur when practices to readdress past discrimination are enacted" (Peterson(a) 18).

This brings the discussion back to the use of language in diversity. As already mentioned, it is important to consider what words and terminology are used. The use of specific terms over others, such as diversity rather than race, communicates as much about the process as the descriptions and goals. These words and terms "mean or represent or symbolize something beyond themselves" (Searle 60) and act as representations of majority culture or hegemony. To put these words into a public forum is to support their use and to accept the implicit and implied meanings. "To speak the official language, without further specification…is tacitly to accept the official definition of the official language of a political unit" (Bourdieu, 45). The framework for how diversity is defined and how it is understood is set by those who set and enforce policy and by those who define parameters for success and failure. Whoever controls the rhetoric and terminology, controls the perception of the process, as well as strongly influencing the outcomes. In this sense, words have power. The use of diversity presented as a celebration of difference rather than the direct focus on racial tensions and past discrimination weakens the impact of programs, even when they are aimed at specific ethnic or racial groups. "All linguistic practices are measured against the legitimate practices, i.e. the practices of those who are dominant" (Bourdieu, 53). In the United States and in the LIS professions, the dominant racial group is White/Caucasian (Dovidio, U.S. Department of Labor). The language used for diversity is often the language approved by those in power, which allows for diversity to be restricted to a specific

framework, one that does not seriously challenge or change the existing powers and privileges enjoyed by whites.

Where should LIS go from here in regards to diversity? To begin with, the profession needs to continue to ask difficult questions regarding the views and expectations that help to shape the concept of diversity. We also need to approach the issue with more than just good intentions and vague expectations. "Nor is it enough here to have simply the philanthropic impulse – simply a rather blind and aimless desire to do good." (DuBois (b) 292) In other words, LIS needs to look beyond the obvious answers and begin to question the assumptions that have supported and influenced the profession for decades. Real change requires a strong commitment of those involved to recognize that there is more than one point of view and that how-it-is is not always how-it-should-be. It requires everyone to question their perceptions and assumptions and accept that they may be wrong, or perhaps not entirely correct.

The classifications and categories used to identify diversity, such as Asian American, librarians of color, and underrepresented, also need analysis and revision. These groupings and identifications can be both limiting and overly broad. While this is an issue that will not be easily solved, the first step may be to allow classifications to be determined by the various groups themselves rather than by those with the most influence and power. This would be a complex and complicated process, but one that has the potential for integration of ideas, inclusiveness of the many rather than of a few, and the identification of new associations and relationships among and across the different classifications and categories.

In his article "Libraries & Memories: Beyond White Privilege 101", George Lipsitz (2009) clearly lays out many of the practices, attitudes, and expectations that strengthen the role of white privilege in society and through this process, renew and reinforce the subtle structures and patterns of racism in the United States. He ends the article by encouraging librarians and other LIS professionals to join the fight for racial justice and reminds us of our role in "deciding what will be remembered and what will be forgotten, who will be included and who will be excluded, who will speak and who is silenced." In other words, Lipsitz is asking LIS professionals to take a hard look at themselves and ask what are we doing, how are we doing it, and who are we doing it to? If the answers to these questions are not uncomfortable, perhaps we need to question our answers.

While the best way to fully incorporate all diverse views into the profession would be to start over, begin at the beginning, to bring in all views to create the most inclusive profession, the idea is unrealistic. However, just because it is not realistic to start at the beginning, it does not mean that we cannot look at the issues from a real starting point, one in which integration rather than assimilation is considered; one where all viewpoints are evaluated and analyzed on their merits rather than against the existing standard; and to require that the majority view – the white privilege view – be evaluated

alongside all of the others. "The best way to make readers aware of such taken-for-granted assumptions is to disrupt them; otherwise they reinforce racial and gender status quos in organizations" (Grimes, 395).

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