PAPER

The whiteness of European Library and Information Science

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Keywords: Racism, Diversity, Equity and Inclusivity, European Library & Information Science

Introduction

As the brutal murder of George Floyd in 2020 brought to the fore the prevalence and ugliness of racism, sales of books on racism increased by more than 6800%. They remain very high at +2800% in 2022[1]. Academic inquiry into race and racism also surged by more than 300%. As a field whose self-acclaimed cardinal contribution to science is the development of methods, tools, language, artefacts and processes to enable people to find the information they need, Library and Information Science (LIS henceforth) cannot shy away from the ongoing world preoccupation with continuing racial inequities and discriminations against people of colour[2]. Whereas a critical race theoretic (CRT) paradigm is now established in the field and intensified since 2020 (cf. the emergence of the critical librarianship strand with associated journals), with the notable exception of the United Kingdom (UK), much of the work, initiatives and writings come from authors situated in North America, Australia and New Zealand. This is all the more troubling considering that the roots of historic systemic racism were sown by European white supremacist ideologues, scientists and monarchs whose imperialist land and resource grabbing expeditions led to the enslavement and colonisation of people deemed inferior. Also, Europe has a significant proportion of people of colour who continue to suffer the effects of racism and prejudice on a daily basis.

Using a mixed method approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this preliminary study takes stock of the part that European institutions and especially LIS have contributed to the ongoing debates, research and initiatives on racial inequities and discriminations in Higher Education Institutions.

2. Diversity, Equity & Inclusivity (DE&I): the tree that hides the forest

In the aftermath of the George Floyd racist murder, many public and big private corporations such as Netflix, Google, Apple Microsoft were forced to make public pronouncements on how they will work to increase "Diversity, Equity & Inclusivity (aka DE&I) in their institutional culture and recruitment and career progression procedures. Many created "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion" (DEI) offices within their organisations. Learned societies including the major ones in LIS all put out statements to the effect that they denounced racism and "stood with the Black community" (ALA[3], ALISE[4], ICCTP[5]). However, studies show that DE&I has become at best a publicity stunt

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and at worst a form of tokenisation that does not address the roots of systemic and structural racism nor the cultures and historical attitudes that entrenched them.

But, as limited and diversionary as DE&I policies and activities are, half a loaf is better than none. When correctly introduced in the in the classroom by educators (and not used as a top-down institutional communication strategy), DE&I modules will at least put the topic on the curriculum and initiate the conversation on racism and racial inequities which is often considered taboo or too inflammable to broach.

2. Publications on racism in the social sciences and humanities: a quantitative approach

To get a global picture of how academic research on racism is being addressed across fields situated in the social sciences, we searched the ISI-Web of Science (WoS) Core collection[6] database which is considered as the most select bibliographic database that indexes and measures scientific publications in all disciplines worldwide. We searched for the word "racism" in all the fields in the last five years (2018 – 2022) and in 55 WoS subject categories situated in the social sciences and humanities.

Table 1. Distribution of the publications on racism by year.

Year	Nb publications	% of 12199
2022[7]	2,227	18.26%
2021	3,451	28.30%
2020	2,721	22.30%
2019	2,116	17.35%
2018	1,684	13.80%

In terms of disciplinary provenance, Psychology is in the topmost position, followed by Education Educational Research and Sociology in the third place. "Information science Library science" which corresponds to LIS arrived at the 42nd position with 92 publications (0,75%). Thus, LIS is performing poorly compared to other social science and humanities fields especially in particular to two sister fields, Education (2nd) and Communication (9th).

Out of the 3236 journals publishing papers on racism, only two LIS journals featured in the list: LIBRARY JOURNAL[8] in the 41st position with 29 publications and LIBRARY TRENDS in the 1083rd position with only 3 publications. Surprisingly, none of the 50 LIS journals listed in the first quartile (Q1) in the Scimago Journal Rankings Report[9] appeared in this list (International Journal of Information management, Information systems research, information and organization, JASIST, Journal of Documentation, IPM, Scientometrics, …). This seems to indicate the reluctance of the field to employ the word "racism" and address its implications head on. It is likely that a search with the more diluted terms of "DE&I, prejudice or multi-culturalism" would have returned more LIS journals.

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[6] Acccording to its website « A curated collection, Web of Science Core Collection contains over 21,100 peer-reviewed, high-quality scholarly journals published worldwide (including Open Access journals) in over 250 sciences, social sciences, and arts & humanities disciplines. Conference proceedings and book data are also available ». - https://clarivate-com.lama.univ-amu.fr/webofsciencegroup/solutions/web-of-science-core-collection/.

[7] The 2022 records are incomplete since the search was performed on 20th September 2022.

[8] This title is not an academic journal per se but « an American trade publication for librarians. It was founded in 1876 by Melvil Dewey. It reports news about the library world, emphasizing public libraries, and offers feature articles about aspects of professional practice. » https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_Journal

[9] https://www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php?category=3309. Consulted on 20/09/2021.

That the majority of the research and teaching on DE&I "in the LIS field (…) is produced in the United States" (Colon-Aguirre & Bright, 2022) is indeed borne out by WoS data, except that this is the case not only for LIS but for the entire social sciences and humanities. Aside from University of London (UK) which came in an honourable 3rd position, the top 20 universities publishing research on racism are North American with 18 being from the USA and 1 from Canada.

A country-by-country distribution shows a similar trend. Of the 126 countries represented, the USA again tops the chart with 6540 publications, the UK arrived second with a fifth of that number (1219) while Canada is in third position with about 12% of US's production (809). Australia is fourth with 641 publications. Perhaps not so surprisingly, Brazil and South Africa, two countries historically marked by brutal apartheid regimes and persistent strong racial inequalities, arrived in the 5th (554) and 6th (276) positions respectively. Germany is the first European country in the 7th position with 222 publications, followed by Spain in the 8th place with 213 publications. Sweden arrived in the 9th place with 162 publications while France is in the 11th place with 127 publications.

Figure 1. Top twenty countries by number of publications on racism in the social sciences and humanities between 2018-2022-09. Source. WoS.
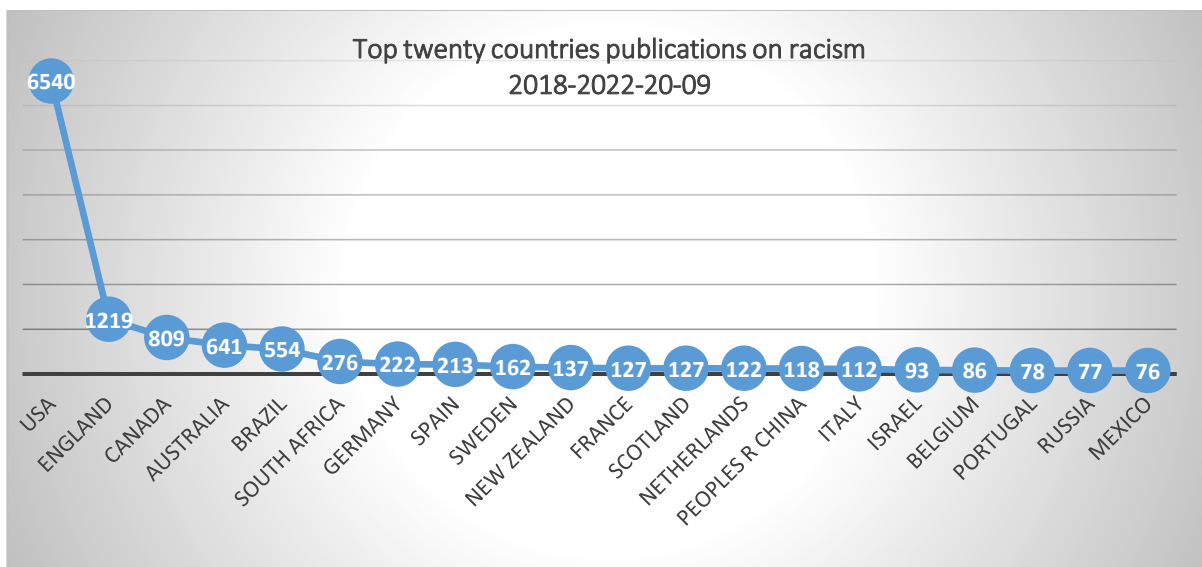
3. The level of DE&I and anti-racism modules in European LIS institutions

We carried out a preliminary qualitative survey to assess the level of representation of ethnic minorities, of DE&I policies and of anti-racism training modules within LIS and/or Knowledge Organisation (KO) institutions in Europe. Of the 34 people contacted, 11 filled the questionnaire, thus a return rate of 34% which is not an unusual rate for empirical studies relying on the willingness of the target population to participate. The 11 people that filled the survey represented 9 countries which lends the responses some measure of representativity of the situation in many European countries. Respondents worked predominantly in universities and were scholars in stable academic positions (professor, lecturer, associate professor, emerita).

Five respondents indicated having fewer than 50 ethnic minority students in their institution while two respondents had between 100-500. In terms of ethnic minority staff and faculty, three respondents had none in their institutions; three had fewer than five, one respondent reported having less than 10 and another respondent fewer than 20. Most respondents had no ethnic minority occupying a position of responsibility in their institution (Dean, Head of school/department, Director of program, Provost, Chancellor, etc). These candid responses show that respondents were aware that prejudice and racism constitute aggravating factors in the face already prevailing politics and favouritism and that this will hinder the accession of people of colour (where they are present in the staff population) to management positions in their institutions.

The seven respondents who answered this question confirmed the existence of some form of DE&I and anti-racism training modules in their institution. While these responses show that some initiatives in the right direction, there is a risk that some of these trainings may end up being an exercise in box ticking which will render them ineffective. Also, none mentioned how the effectiveness of these trainings is measured although we did not explicitly invite respondents to dwell on this.

On whether they believed that incorporating anti-racism modules in LIS/KO degree programmes, the eleven respondents believed that this should become the norm. Finally, nine out of the eleven respondents (81,8%) will be willing to join a coalition that will advocate for anti-racism pedagogy as a requirement to obtain certification of an LIS/Ko degree programme in the future.

Perspectives

This preliminary study showed that Continental Europe and especially LIS community in continental Europe has been largely mute and absent in ongoing debates, initiatives, policies and research to address persistent racial inequities and discriminations. More research is needed in order to understand what factors encourage this mutism and avoidance of one of the most important issues that other fields and sectors are addressing currently.

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