# The nature and role of empathy in public librarianship

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**Abstract**

Presents two recent studies, an AHRC-funded exploration of the role of empathy in community librarianship (Study 1), and an investigation of the role of empathy in service to minority ethnic users (Study 2). Qualitative elements of each methodology are presented, namely a series of focus groups with frontline staff, interviews with senior managers and a research workshop (Study 1), and a case study investigation of a public library in the heart of a Chinese community (Study 2). Synthesizing the data of both studies, an analysis is conducted of the relationship between the cultural identities of library staff, and their ability to empathize with the public. It is concluded that empathy plays a role in facilitating effective communication between staff and users, but that a distinction should be made between intuitive and cognitive empathy, in considering the potential of staff training to develop appropriate levels of emotional response to members of all communities.

**Introduction**

The concept of empathy, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation', or as 'the ability to see another person's world through their eyes', involves the deep understanding of another person's emotions, thoughts and body movements (Aldridge and Rigby, 2001). Empathy is widely discussed in the psychology field and relevant literature as a personality trait and social construct.

In the workplace, empathy is a concept frequently associated with the medical professions, whereby an individual can use empathic skills to foster a mutual relationship (between practitioner and patient) that is based on openness, trust and confidence. As Norfolk et al. (2007) suggest, the central goal of the medical consultation is '…a therapeutic alliance based on trust and co-operation and established through a shared understanding of the patient's perspective'. Outside the medical profession, it has been argued that empathy is 'a core skill which applies to all helping functions' (Shulman, 1979), one of which is, of course, that of the public librarian. Indeed, the public library has long been regarded as situated at the heart of the community (Dolan, 2006:15, MLA, 2006), and felt by many to be one of the key institutions to tackle social inclusion (Train et al, 2000). It would therefore seem reasonable to assert that an exploration of the empathic skills of the staff within the institution would be a valuable study to conduct.

This paper presents findings from two recent public librarianship studies, both of which explore the nature and extent of empathy in public librarianship. The first is an

AHRC-funded project into the role of empathy in community librarianship[i], hereafter described as 'Study 1', and the second is a Masters dissertation which investigated the empathy of community librarians with specific reference to their ethnic minority users (Tso, 2007), hereafter described as 'Study 2'. Both pieces of research are felt to be particularly timely, given for example the current public policy approach to addressing social exclusion in England, which has resulted in a greater involvement of, and expected contribution from, all public service sectors.

**Aims and objectives of the research**

Study 1 was a two-year national investigation of the impact of staff attitudes on the effectiveness of public libraries' contribution to social inclusion policy and objectives. The overall aim was to investigate public library staff attitudes towards the concept of social inclusion. Issues explored included whether or not an individual's ethnicity and social and cultural background can be a key driver in maintaining a positive attitude towards community librarianship. The project has investigated the extent to which an inclusive organization facilitates an inclusive public service, and to which the ability to empathize through personal experience motivates the proactive and successful community librarian.

At a midpoint in Study 1, a Masters dissertation was developed to focus on one aspect of the research, to investigate the extent to which public librarians' ability to empathize could facilitate a more socially inclusive environment for ethnic minority library users. Would library staff find it easier to be empathic if serving users from the same ethnic background as themselves? Does the possession of empathic skills

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[i] 'The right *man* for the job? The role of empathy in community librarianship'. Project website available at http://www.shef.ac.uk/is/research/centres/cplis/research/rightman.html

increase the overall effectiveness of library staff, particularly in relation to their work with ethnic minority users? And to what extent do both library staff and users feel that empathy is an essential attribute to have when serving ethnic minority users?

Given the ethnic background and location of the researcher (Tso), Study 2 focused in particular on the Chinese community of Sheffield.

**Empathy and ethnicity: a brief exploration of the literature**

**Intercultural and cross-cultural communication**

It is important to note the distinction between empathy, an internal process, and communication skills, 'as used in open expression between individuals' (Norfolk et al, 2007: 692). The two are not the same, and to have good communication skills does not imply that an individual is necessarily empathic, although an empathic interaction will include effective communication.

Nonetheless, empathy has long been regarded as an essential aspect of effective communication (Hardee, 2003). To attentively listen and appropriately respond is the essence of communication, and one's ability to demonstrate empathy is felt to facilitate this process. Described as 'a social process' (Hartley, 1999), effective communication is subject to many external, social factors, such as physical and social environments, social and cultural norms. Of these, the cultural factors are considered to be particularly influential, as Zhang (2006) observes: 'the culture in which a person is nurtured and socialized influence the way he or she presents messages, and helps him or her shape appropriate communication behaviours, such as listening, speaking, silence, distance, and body language' (Zhang, 2006).

If we accept that the ability to empathize is subject to cultural factors (LeBaron, 2003), it is therefore reasonable to suggest that communication will be more effective between two people with the same ethnic background, as they are influenced by the same culture, and restrained by the same set of social norms (Tso, 2007: 19).

However, for both studies it was necessary also to consider the communication which takes place across cultures. The terms 'cultural empathy' and 'ethnocultural empathy' (Wang et al., 2003) are used to describe the use of empathy in a cross-cultural context. Considered to be a 'deepening of the human empathic response to permit a sense of mutuality and understanding across the great differences in value and expectation that cross-cultural interchange often involves' (Dyche and Zayas, 2004), these terms therefore refer to the skill to effectively 'bridge the gap' between two people with different ethnic backgrounds.

Exploring this idea a little further, Wang et al (2003) propose that culturally specific empathy has three possible components: firstly, *intellectual empathy*, or 'the ability to understand an ethnically different person's thinking or feeling'; secondly, *empathic emotions* which are demonstrated when the same level of attention is given to all, whether from the same or different ethnic background; and thirdly, *communicative empathy*, which refers to the ability to express empathic thoughts and feeling.

**Professional empathy**

As stated above, empathy is regarded by many as an essential skill in the medical professions. The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), for example,

6

has also set the cultivation of empathy as a specific learning objective (Hojat et al., 2002).

In addition, the concept of empathy has been explored within the management, organisational behaviour and occupational psychology fields, particularly in terms of the analysis of staff interaction and interpersonal behaviour. Situational studies have been undertaken in order to explore the value of empathic traits in professional transactions and relationships. Chlopan et al (1985) report that empathy studies undertaken with therapists and clinical psychologists indicate that high empathy scores amongst practitioners are linked to better client prognoses and therapeutic outcomes.

As the ability to empathize can be subject to cultural factors, it is argued that there would be a greater level of empathy between two people with the same ethnic origin. In a work environment, it is believed that this has a potential impact on service delivery. Research has been conducted in this area in both medical and educational settings. An Australian study, for example, paired clinicians and mental health patients with the same ethnic background (Ziguras et al., 2003). Findings suggested that the service use is greater when ethnic minority patients were paired with a bilingual clinician, than when they were not. This may have been due to the patients finding it easier to express themselves fully with someone who they feel understands them better. In the educational field, ethnic similarity is also felt to have benefited tutor-tutee relationships, where the similarity can facilitate 'a more relaxed and co-operative atmosphere', thereby having a 'positive and direct impact upon perceived tutoring effectiveness' (Fresko and Chen, 1989).

**Empathy and librarianship**

Empathy is a relatively new concept in the field of librarianship research, and prior to the present study only limited findings were available. Nikolova (2004) states that 'empathy is one of the psychological skills that a librarian must work to improve', and that it could serve to improve the quality of service provided. Attentive listening, it is felt, can enhance the effectiveness of a conversation between user and librarian leading, for example, to an improved reference interview. Nikolova also argues that empathy is not an innate skill, but one which could be learned.

Burghardt and Grunwald (2001) comment that one should 'learn to understand and translate other peoples through structures and needs', which is of relevance to information provision, as the librarian is therefore in a better position to effectively respond to a wide range of enquiries.

We can also consider empathy in the context of the scientific measurement of a library's service quality. The Association of Research Libraries' LibQUAL+ diagnostic tool enables the measurement of library's users' opinions of service quality (*LibQUAL+,* 2008). Empathy is implicitly referred to within this tool, described for the respondent as the extent to which a librarian shows his or her responsiveness, assurance, reliability, and as 'the caring, individualized attention the firm provides to its customers' (Cook et al., 2001).

If we consider the service impact of professional-client ethnic similarity in other professions, it would seem appropriate also to consider this issue in a library setting.

A librarian from a particular minority ethnic community would therefore be in a better position to serve users from that same community than a colleague who is not of the same ethnic origin. Reasons for this could be the consequent removal of language barriers, or the willingness of minority ethnic users to express their information needs to librarians from the same background as themselves.

Tso (2007) hypothesizes that for these reasons, a Chinese librarian may provide a better service to Chinese users than a non-Chinese librarian. If the librarian and user do not share the same ethnic background, she suggests that 'a high cultural awareness is also desirable' (21). Although specifically considering the academic librarian, Zhang (2006) recommends that library staff should receive staff training in 'foreign language and culture', in order to deliver the best possible service to all potential users.

**Methodology**

Although there was a quantitative element to Study 1 (described below), the overall methodological structure of both Studies 1 and 2 was predominantly qualitative.

According to Berg (1995), 'certain experiences cannot be meaningfully expressed by numbers'. Adopting a qualitative research approach enables the collection of 'data which is flexible and sensitive to the social context' (Mason, 2002). As the key concept of both studies - 'the ability to empathize' - is abstract in nature, its interpretation will vary from one person to another. A qualitative approach is therefore felt to be an effective means of conducting an in-depth investigation of the effect of empathy on library service delivery.

For **Study 1**, five research methods were employed, namely a quantitative national survey of public library staff, qualitative interviews and focus groups with a stratified sample of staff, a review of the literature, and a job vacancy monitoring exercise. In order to most helpfully explore the issues of empathy and ethnicity, findings for this paper have been drawn from the national survey and, primarily, the subsequent focus groups and interviews.

*National professional empathy survey*

The survey was conducted in Autumn 2006, during which 1100 questionnaires were distributed to a stratified sample of 90 public library authorities (PLAs) in total (within and across the nine English regions). A total of 453 completed questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 41%.

The objectives of the survey were to provide a statistical profile of library staff in terms of demographic, professional and cultural issues. In addition, the research team (Birdi and Wilson) developed a measure of Professional Empathy, which was included in the survey to explore library staff attitudes towards the community role of the public library, socially excluded groups, and professional roles and responsibilities in addressing exclusion.

*Focus groups with frontline staff and interviews with senior managers*

Qualitative fieldwork was undertaken during Spring-Summer 2007 in order to build upon the inferences drawn from statistical data already collected.

This was achieved via a series of focus groups with frontline staff and interviews with senior managers. One focus group was planned in each English region (nine in total), and front-line staff were invited to attend via postings on relevant email discussion lists, regional organisations and service heads/managers. Six focus groups took place: three sessions were unfortunately cancelled due to low participant numbers, although volunteers from these three regions were telephone interviewed as an alternative to the planned focus group sessions. In total, 33 staff participated in this phase of the research. A total of ten interviews were also conducted with senior managers, again across the nine English regions. The same semi-structured research instrument was used in both focus groups and interviews, in order to provide comparable data.

Following these data collection phases, a research workshop took place, at which selected participants, stakeholders and the research team discussed research findings and ideas for the remaining period, the dissemination process and the overall sustainability of the project. Comments made at this workshop are also included in the findings (below).

**Study 2** adopted a case study approach. Often used for 'an exploratory investigation' (Hamel et al., 1993), this method is desirable for an exploration of this kind: as previously stated, the concept of empathy is relatively new to the field of librarianship. As the 'case' forms the main body of the study, it must be chosen with care. For this study, Highfield Library in Sheffield was specifically selected to meet the objectives of the research. Situated in the heart of Sheffield's Chinese community, all library staff – including two Chinese people - would be in frequent contact with Chinese users. Data collected for the 2001 census (Sheffield City Council, 2003:3)

demonstrate that 8.8% (45,017 people) of the city's total population were non-white. With specific reference to the Chinese community of Sheffield, the census reported that 2,201 Chinese people were living in Sheffield at the time, or 0.4% of the total population. This proportion is, interestingly, identical to the national data collected at the same time (for England and Wales).

*The ethnicity of the researcher*

A significant methodological issue for both studies – in particular the case study for Study 2, given the ethnic composition of the sample - is that of the ethnicity of the researcher. It has been suggested that ethnicity can affect the quality of data collected in an interview or focus group. Abbas (2006) asserts that where a researcher interviews a person from a different ethnic background, he or she is 'potentially lacking a detailed knowledge or appreciation of particular cultural, and ethnic factors and can be considered a social intruder'.

In Study 2, non-Chinese library staff were asked to share their experiences of interacting with Chinese users. As the interviewer was Chinese, she was concerned that non-Chinese staff may not have felt sufficiently comfortable to give the most honest response to each question, perhaps instead giving 'a polite answer which would not offend the Chinese interviewer' (Tso, 1997:13). Indeed, Stanfield (1993) refers to 'the basic question of whether or not Euro-Americans can penetrate the intersubjectivity of people of color' (9). At the same time, cross-cultural interviewing could be advantageous, in that the interview itself could help to raise participants' awareness of the subject under discussion. Conducting a study of 'poor elderly women, both Black and white…and their perceptions of how relations between whites

and Blacks in their community had changed over the course of their lifetime'
Andersen, a white researcher, reports that one participant thanked her for the
opportunity that the interview had given her and her family to talk openly about 'their
racial histories' (In Stanfield, 1993: 46-8).

It is hoped that both Studies 1 and 2 have contributed to an equally positive outcome,
in this case to raise awareness that the ability to empathize with all service users -
whatever their ethnicity may be - could be an essential attribute for the library
profession.

**Empathy in practice**

Having considered the ethnic profile of both study sample populations and of the
public library service as a whole, we can now consider empathy in practice,
examining the real-world relationship between the cultural and ethnic identities of
staff and their capacity to empathize with the public.

When asked if they had experienced any opposition to the provision of socially
inclusive services, participants in each of the Study 1 focus groups described a certain
'low level resistance' amongst some (usually described as 'older') staff members.
Although the term 'low level' was repeatedly used, the frequency with which the
issue was raised within and across groups is a matter of some concern. It is worth
noting, however, that many respondents described a resistance to change rather than
to social inclusion policy specifically, with particular reference made to cultural
changes in public libraries such as the large scale introduction of IT and the internet:

'I think with any kind of service it can depend on the person…people will adopt new practices and some people won't let go of the old ones' (North East FG)

'… the only opposition I can think of is low level mumblings about the internet access, because we get so many users with poor English skills, or none at all… they come up to the counter and just bark 'internet' at us which gets a certain degree of resentment… I wouldn't say it's out and out opposition as such, it's more sort of cynicism' (West Midlands FG)

There were, however, some positive comments regarding the capacity of library staff to embrace change, and it was generally felt that a certain degree of resistance to change is inevitable in any organization:

'… what is lucky about the people that do work in public libraries… in the main people are empathic… they're open to new ideas… yes we've still got dinosaurs but there are dinosaurs wherever you work and I think in the main library staff are open to change…' (West Midlands FG)

'The grumblings are inevitable, but everybody comes round eventually… we have a fantastic group of people working for us who take whatever's thrown at them' (North East: Senior Library Manager)

Respondents reinforced the idea that any resistance is linked to cultural change and, moreover, a re-thinking of the nature of the public library space. Some members of staff were described as 'traditionalists', rejecting new concepts and ideas in the first instance, but now beginning to embrace and take forward ideas. The issue of diversity

was also raised, and it was felt that resistance was not related to a more ethnically diverse user group:

> 'It is the modernisation that causes tension and it has to be well managed… we brought in that people would be allowed to use mobile phones and have discrete drinks and snacks, because people come in for whole days, but we had a huge backlash against that… but diversity no, they're just another customer' (London FG)

> '…it's not diversity that's the issue, it's introducing new ways of doing things… we've got a senior management that has been there for a long time and suppressed any new ideas and they're a bit resentful of change' (London FG)

Despite claims that staff resistance, however minimal, was not directed towards social inclusion policy or any specifically targeted groups, there was some evidence of antagonism towards certain initiatives and a wide range of groups within the social inclusion agenda. Comments made appear to reflect a degree of prejudice towards particular communities, although certain participants gave a more pragmatic response, suggesting that reaching diverse communities is not always straightforward:

> 'I have had problems with LGBT issues from staff and users… if the gay collection is very in your face the users get a bit uptight… I was aware of one member of staff who would carefully move the pink paper… I once worked in a library that put Gay Times in a brown envelope, that was three or four years ago, I don't know if they do it now… but there are still pockets of resistance on occasion. '(East of England FG)

'We've had issues over providing women-only desks for female Muslim users…
we've had to keep a record of how many male and female members of staff are
working on each desk at any time… it gets silly' (West Midlands FG)

'Some staff act as a 'judge' in terms of 'who should come in' to the library.'
(Research dissemination workshop)

In some cases staff members have not been averse to voicing or demonstrating their
opposition, both to colleagues and users themselves:

'…we've still got the power tricks from staff… shouting out really loud that a user
has a fine, which for some cultures or age groups is a huge embarrassment, especially
for people who are feeling insecure about how they're perceived, like asylum seekers
or refugees.' (Yorkshire FG)

'Somebody actually said to me [with reference to ESOL provision] "well if they've
been here 30 years and haven't bothered to learn the language, then why should we
bother?"' (East Midlands FG)

It was felt that, in order to overcome this hostility and some of the related insecurities
shared by staff members, a greater sense of inclusion was required with reference to
policy design and implementation, which would in turn encourage a greater
understanding and appreciation, both of the social inclusion agenda and socially
excluded people:

'I have to admit that I've heard some quite dodgy comments behind the scenes…
about whether we should be providing services for non-rate payers, things like that…

if we were more involved in policy decisions there would be less negativity.

Instructions from on high will always prompt people to be negative and defensive.'

(Yorkshire FG)

**Is empathy an important aspect of public librarianship?**

All librarians interviewed for Study 2 were asked to consider the importance of empathy in delivering effective community librarianship. Non-Chinese interviewees believed it to be essential:

> 'It's very helpful because if you don't know anything about any other culture, then I don't think you are going to be able to understand their needs that well. I think you need to have some idea of different people's background… If you knew only about British people, you would not get very far really.' (B2)

> 'Yes. It is absolutely essential especially in this area. There is a big mixture of people.' (B4)

A Chinese librarian suggested that empathy is an essential attribute for a community librarian, in helping one to be more sensitive to a user's needs:

> 'Very often, users might not tell you what they want in a very direct way. The ability to empathize allows me to become more sensitive, like a detective, so as to explore what users need better. This ability is beneficial to the librarian as a professional.' (C1)

**How empathic are public library staff?**

Participants at the research workshop for Study 1 were asked to consider how empathic they felt public library staff to be. Comments made were generally positive, although it was not automatically assumed that staff working in each department of the library service would have the same level of empathy:

'Empathic? – they try to be.'

'Home delivery service (outreach) – staff very empathic, fantastic skills. Not all staff will be the same.'

'[There is a] general feeling that there are some 'sections of society' that most people are able to deal with, others less so: comes down to those groups we 'have more experience of dealing with'.

'…[working] with e.g. looked after children…[there is a] heightened awareness, staff with greater empathy there.'

Asked to describe their own level of empathy, all non-Chinese librarians interviewed for Study 2 rated themselves quite highly:

'Probably quite good I would say. I know it can be hard to come in to communicate with people and stuff like that. I won't say that I know everything but I think I know quite a bit about it. '(B2)

'I think experience helps a lot… it is a learning process, a continue learning process. And I think we all improve over the years. I am sure I am better. I know I am better.' (B1)

'I did a bit of social working before I came to the library with special children…The experience…helps me a lot in developing this ability.' (B3)

In describing their own competence in this area, interviewees often referred to the ethnicity of the users they were interacting with, suggesting that empathy is particularly required in a cross-cultural setting:

'On a good day, 8 or 9. So I think I have a good degree of understanding of what the users might need. On a bad day,  4. It would depend on the situation, for example how good the Chinese users could speak English, sometimes.' (B4)

'You have got to try to put yourself in their position and imagine what you would feel like walking through the door into a strange place and asking question in a language that properly not your first language. So you know it is not easy. You should try and understand how these people might be feeling no matter what culture they come from.' (B1)

'If, for example, there's a Muslim person, you have to be careful what you wear in the library. Because of their religious views, you don't want to offend them in anyway by wearing like something too revealing.' (B2)

**Empathy in practice: the users' perspective**

As the case study library is situated at the heart of the Chinese community, library staff and Chinese users come into frequent contact:

>'I visit the library almost everyday. The librarians here are all very
>
>nice. They all greet me in the morning.' (U1)

Such contact could arguably facilitate the development of cultural understanding and therefore develop the ability to empathize (Tso, 2007). Similarly, library staff have reported that they are also in contact with the Chinese community outside the library, having participated in cultural celebrations or social gatherings. Via these informal events, staff claim to have learned more about Chinese culture which could arguably enhance their awareness of, and sensitivity towards, cultural differences. Being in regular contact with the Chinese community seems, therefore, to be a positive means of developing an ability to empathize (Tso, 2007).

Nonetheless, staff and user interviews suggested that many Chinese users regard the library only as a place for reading newspapers and magazines, or for borrowing books published in the Chinese languages. Respondents referred to requests for basic service support, such as applying for a library card, asking for new reading material or help in using the Internet, and to very little social conversation:

>'I usually talk to the library staff only if I need help [with a] library
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>service. For example, applying for a library card or seek help on
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>looking for books or other library items. When I first joined the
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>library, I did not know how to access to the internet in the library

with the new username and password. I have asked a librarian for

help. She was very friendly and showed me how to do it.' (U2)

'It's all about [the] library service and they are very brief

conversations. They are all related to library service enquires.

Sometimes, I would ask if there are any new Chinese books or when

the library would buy Chinese books.' (U3)

It was felt by the library staff that these users 'keep to themselves as a group', and

could not be described as a difficult group to serve, with their needs relatively easily

satisfied.  Although library staff can be pleased that the needs of most Chinese users

appear to have been met, the public library should have more to offer than merely

fulfilling its function as a book warehouse. Chinese users, in particular the older

members of the community, may benefit from a more social interaction with the

library staff.  A particularly striking example of support given by a Chinese librarian

to an elderly Chinese user is given below:

'Usually, I would ask the Chinese librarian to do translation for me. I

live with my wife and both of us could not read and write English.

[The]  Chinese librarian's English standard is really good. I would

ask her to read the letters or other documents for us. For example, we

are not sure and even have no ideas where the letters are sent from.

We could not tell if they are important or just an advertisement or

leaflet. We would ask the librarian to help us…She has really made

our lives easier.' (U1)

As the literature states, empathy is a key part of communication, so it could be suggested that a language barrier – clearly in place between many (particularly elderly) Chinese users and non-Chinese public library staff – prevent a truly empathic relationship from developing. Certainly, when asked if they preferred to interact with Chinese or non-Chinese library staff, the Chinese interviewees had no stated preference, unless language ability was an issue. This would seem to infer that a minority ethnic community librarian is not necessarily regarded as essential by the users themselves:

> 'It is because I do not speak English. I need [a] Chinese librarian to help me with certain things like finding the book I want to read.' (U4)

Interestingly, despite the above comment the same interviewee observed:

> 'The [British librarians]…seem to be more active in showing their concern in what I need. They would ask me: "Do you need any help?" They care about me. I think British people pay more attention to the needs of old people and show respect.' (U4)

Where a user's standard of English was sufficiently high to communicate with a non-Chinese librarian, no distinction was made between the skills of the Chinese or non-Chinese staff. Where language was more of a barrier, however, it is clear that a Chinese librarian provided a level of support that would not otherwise be possible.

A further barrier to an empathic service is time, firstly in that an opportunity to be empathic will not necessarily present itself in a brief exchange as a book is issued or returned, and secondly in that a shortage of library staff will reduce the time available for communication with the user communities. Finally, it could even be the case that the Chinese users' expectations and attitudes may discourage the library staff from developing an empathic relationship with them. Case study data show that this user group is not always keen to talk to the library staff, feeling shy or even that conversation is not necessary:

> 'I usually ask them [the library staff] for the latest newspaper and
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> magazines…Actually, it is not necessary to talk to them very often.' (U1)

**Discussion**

The first conclusion to draw from the findings of both Studies 1 and 2 is that many library staff are perceived – by themselves, their colleagues and service users - to be empathic in their interactions with the public. It has been shown that empathy plays a clear role in facilitating more effective communication between library staff and users, whether or not English is their first language.

A number of library staff and users clearly believe that staff cultural profiles are irrelevant to the degree of empathy shown, and that staff have sufficient cognitive empathy skills to provide responsive and sensitive services for a wide range of users and social groups. A smaller number of both staff and users, however, felt that the 'traditionally disadvantaged' groups may place a greater degree of trust and confidence in people they recognize as familiar, or relate to and understand.

This issue was explored further as respondents in both Studies appeared to differentiate between library staff with a natural aptitude for working with excluded groups (having 'intuitive empathy'), and those without. Study 1 quantitative data suggest that staff perceive high levels of cognitive empathy to exist within an otherwise culturally homogenous workforce, but interestingly the qualitative data which explored the issue further found that a number of staff described a strong resistance to cultural change, to certain excluded groups, and to the social inclusion agenda as a whole.

Cultural issues apart, it could be suggested that if a member of library staff is motivated to try to understand the needs and wants of a library user – having 'the conscious or spontaneous commitment to engage fully with…individual experience' – and possesses certain diagnostic skills with which to make 'constructive sense' of those needs and wants, he or she would therefore have a greater empathic ability (Norfolk et al, 2007).

In exploring the wider implications for public library services and staff of these findings, and looking at practical steps which can be taken to improve a culturally supportive service, it is first necessary to ask if empathy is a skill that can be developed through training, or if it is an innate ability?

In exploring this question we can look in more detail at the elements within the overall concept of empathy. Psychologists have described three types of empathy, namely cognitive, intuitive, or a combination of both cognitive and intuitive

(emotional) elements. Hogan (1969) refers to empathy as a cognitive or intellectual process, involving an imagined understanding of others, and perspective taking. In other words, it is 'the intellectual or imaginative apprehension of another's condition or state of mind without actually experiencing that person's feelings'. Chlopan et al (1985, p.635), however, cite several psychologists who identified empathy as 'an involuntary vicarious experience of another's emotional state', suggesting that empathy is an emotional response based on instinct and shared understanding. And Levenson and Ruef (1992) offer three separate dimensions to empathy, including *knowing* what another person is feeling; *feeling* what another is feeling; *responding compassionately* to another person's distress. An individual is capable of experiencing each of these empathic dimensions in differing circumstances.

If we are to agree with Hogan and others that professional empathy has cognitive or intellectual elements, it could reasonably be assumed that an appropriate training programme would facilitate a more empathic workforce. If, on the other hand, we feel that critics such as Chlopan et al are correct in their assertion that empathy is more an involuntary response to others, it would be far more difficult to raise levels of empathy in this way.

A recent study involving GPs and clinical psychologists concluded that rapport between doctor and patient could be enhanced through carefully designed training programmes which address clinicians' cognitive understanding, communication skills and levels of motivation (Norfolk et al, 2007).

Participants of both Studies 1 and 2 commented on the role of staff training in delivering an empathic service. For Study 1 workshop participants, training was undoubtedly a priority, the link clear between the two:

'Sometimes, people are trying hard to help, but a lack of training means that they get it wrong.'

'Those staff who have been trained are good, there's a direct link between training received and empathy.'

Findings from Studies 1 and 2 and the literature would suggest that an appropriate training programme for public library staff would not focus specifically on empathy, but that it may be related to 'cultural awareness training'. As the name suggests, the objective of such training is to raise participants' awareness and understanding of a culture other than their own. In the case study library service (Study 2), such training tends to be delivered by an employee from the culture in question. The Chinese librarian, for example, stated that he had delivered training to raise awareness of his own culture, and that he had also attended training courses related to other cultures. Speaking not only of his own experience, he felt that cultural awareness training courses had helped all participating staff to develop their ability to empathize with others:

'I think the cultural awareness training course itself already provides training to librarians to develop their ability to empathize. Empathy is about knowing another's situation so as to make a better situation. For example, when I attend my colleague's training course, I gather

the information from him. Then I learn how to interact with that

particular ethnic minority based on the information.' (C1)

In addition to cultural awareness training, the Chinese librarian felt that empathy

should be a concept specifically covered in induction programmes for new staff:

'…it [empathy] should be mentioned in a general library induction

course. It is because empathy applies to all people. This induction

would then be an ideal opportunity to mention 'empathy could help

you to better serve a customer'. It applies to everybody.' (C1)

This participant was concerned that the inclusion of empathy only in cultural

awareness training courses could have a negative effect on staff motivation:

'Otherwise, there would be a linkage between empathy and ethnic

minorities. Such linkage may exert a burden on librarians when they

serve the ethnic minorities. It is because they may think they need to

do something extra.' (C1)

**Final points**

Given the evidence from Studies 1 and 2, it would be fair to conclude that it would be

difficult to 'teach empathy', to train staff to develop an emotional response that is

informed and influenced by personality, belief systems and other individual

characteristics. However, the development of certain empathic skills can be

encouraged by providing public library staff with the right knowledge and

27

circumstantial information, involving them in decision-making processes, and facilitating the development of appropriate skills.

As a result of such interventions, staff can be enabled to show higher levels of empathy towards members of all communities, provided that they are willing – and have some natural capacity – to do so.

This would appear to be a significant finding in supporting library staff at all levels to communicate with library users from all cultural backgrounds and, in the longer term, to deliver a more effective service.

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