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Reading the Silence: Canadian Library Responses to Racial Injustice

Abstract:

This paper presents the findings of a research study on the statements issued by the Canadian library community in the wake of George Floyd's death in May 2020. The study employed mixed-methods content analysis to (a) identify formal responses between May to August 2020; (b) analyze themes; and, (c) identify commitments for future accountability and research. Ninety-seven organizations were in the study and represent large public and academic libraries along with provincial, national, and professional associations. The results show that one third of the sampled Canadian library community formally responded with an organizational statement and fewer situated their organizations as contributors to systemic racism in Canadian society.

1. Introduction/Background

On May 25, 2020, the world watched in horror as video spread of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, die during an arrest by Minneapolis Police Department (MPD). The alarming video showed officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds with the community filming in distress (Hill et al 2020). As video of the arrest circulated, a large wave of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests grew around the world. The outpouring of public support centered around justice and action – and not just from police and criminal justice systems. Rather, there was a distinct rise in anti-racist consciousness as many began to take seriously the epidemic of anti-Black racism. Prominent individuals, institutions, and organizations responded with statements that expressed shock, offered support for racial equality, and often commitments to evaluate systemic racism in their institutions and practices.

Using mixed-method content analysis, this paper presents the results of a study that examined 97 institutions in the Canadian library community to identify the number of formal statements issued and their commitments to address anti-Black racism. The results show that only 34% of the Canadian library community in the sample responded with a statement and even fewer situated themselves as meaningful contributor to systemic racism. When acknowledged, the role of libraries was predominantly framed as one of information literacy to communities as opposed to participants in a system of white supremacy or cultural normativity. It also found that responses were primarily directed at the non-Black community and crucially failed to address the present and enduring emotional trauma and burden on Black communities. Although often positioned as anti-racist, this study presents troubling evidence about the ways in which the Canadian library community conceives and responds to profound acts of racism and injustice.

2. Research Study

The goals of this research study were to (a) identify formal responses to BLM protests; (b) analyze themes; and, (c) identify commitments made for future accountability and research. This

study was conducted using formal statements issued between May 25, 2020 and August 1, 2020 that addressed Floyd's death and/or the BLM movement and protests. Content analysis was employed to measure the number statements issued and to count words or phrases (Williams & Vogt 2011). Reflexive thematic analysis was used to qualitatively describe patterns found in the data. This study adopted a primarily inductive coding method as it was anticipated and confirmed that specific themes and wording would be found in statements (i.e. Black Lives Matter, condemnation of racism, and commitments to anti-racism, etc.). However, a formal codebook was not developed a priori to capture nuance and variance in stated intent and meaning. In contrast to positivist approaches that posit a neutral relationship between the researcher and results, reflexive thematic analysis recognizes the conscious participation of the researcher in selecting, describing, and reporting data (Braun & Clarke 2006). Thus, this compels recognition of the theoretical positions applied to the study (Braun & Clarke 2006).

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopted an anti-oppression and anti-racist framework informed by Leslie Potts and Karen Brown (2006), George Sefa Dei (2014), and Sara Ahmed (2006). Fundamentally, anti-oppression frameworks are focused on "reversing the gaze" on the processes and relations of power that underlie inequality (Potts and Brown 2005, 19). This is operationalized through the object of the study and a rejection of methodologies that study or speak for others. "Truth is created", according to Potts and Brown (2005, 20). Accordingly, this research adopts a social constructivist approach to examining the epistemological foundations of knowledge rather than seeking to validate its truthfulness (Potts and Brown 2005). As an education scholar, Dei is mindful of good intentions behind the work of people in social service professions (2014, 14). However, he stresses the need to disrupt the normative acceptance of white Eurocentrism as neutral and objective by showing how it produces "hegemonic knowledges" and reproduces hegemonic structures of power (Dei 2014, 18). Finally, Ahmed adds a more pointed critique of institutional narratives and claims to anti-racism. Drawing attention to the difference between stating an anti-racist perspective and enacting anti-racism practices, Ahmed is concerned these claims are non-performative such that rhetorical support is offered in place of tangible measures to address roles, practices, or policies that contribute to systemic racism (2006, para. 1).

4. Study Results

Ninety-seven members of the Canadian library community were sampled. Thirty-three (33) made a formal statement and the response rate varied substantially by category (see table 1).

Table 1: Formal Statements by Organization Category

Organization Category	In study	Statements	%
National or provincial library associations	13	5	38%
Professional or library-specific associations	6	5	83%
Public Library Systems	44	17	39%
Academic or research libraries	27	2	7%
Faculty/departments at university with a master's program in library and/or information science.	7	4	57%
Total	97	33	34%

Theme 1: Use of non-explicit language

Only six statements referred to Floyd or listed the names of others lost to racial violence. The majority used less direct language such as "recent events". This lack of specificity was repeated when many did not explicitly discuss library work in conjunction with systems of racial injustice and oppression. Thirty statements (91%) referenced anti-black racism and 28 statements (85%) referenced Black Lives Matter whereas white supremacy was in 10 statements (30%) and three addressed white privilege (9%). Diversity and derivatives of inclusion were referenced over 100 times with no references to terms like social exclusion that underpin need for these measures.

Theme 2: Performative anti-racism

Statements envisioned their respective organizations playing a substantive role supporting anti-racism and race equity. However, the language used was often consistent with performative anti-racism. This was expressed through figurative descriptions of standing in support or solidarity (25 references), condemnations of racism and violence (21 references) or promises to take concrete steps or measures (16 references). In other cases, commitments offered were vague and lacked clear meaning or featured broad and unspecific commitments. For example, one library states that "we will strive to replace ignorance with knowledge, intolerance with compassion, and inequity with justice within our community" and another states they are "committed to fostering inclusivity within the larger fight against systemic racism". While these statements reflected language that implied strong support of racial justice and social equity, they tended to not include actions or commitments that would enable measurement or future accountability.

Theme 3: Information sharing as anti-racism

Many shared library resources such as book lists featuring popular anti-racist authors. However, while statements often offered support for communities experiencing racial injustice, this was generally not reflected in the resources provided. Most were for the non-Black community and focused on educating about racial injustice and its effects. Whereas only one organization offered information on emotional and community support for those affected by violence and racism.

Theme 4: Problematic community engagement

There were frequent indications of aspirational goals to engage in conversations with their communities about racial equity and justice. However, these were often vague or offered intangible specifics on involvement or measurable actions. One-third made no commitments whereas others had minimal commitments to review policies and procedures, conduct internal audits, provide staff training on anti-black racism, and increase awareness of diverse literature. Table 2 provides a fulsome breakdown of commitments made in the 33 statements. Notably, there were also no commitments to ensure these conversations were led by members of Black communities. The spirit of the commitments was that they wanted to listen and support anti-racism in their communities as opposed to explicitly engaging with anti-racism as a practice.

Table 2:

Action or Commitment	Total

Statement offered no action or commitment	12
Review collections, programming, and policies to promote inclusivity and equity	8
Staff education and development on systemic racism	8
Undertake consultations with Black communities, staff, faculty, or members	5
Acquire, promote, and support awareness of diverse and/or BIPOC resources	5
Support initiatives and conversations on systemic racism and/or anti-Black racism	5
Share anti-racism resources with library community	4
Review and incorporate external policies on race, equity, diversity and/or inclusion	4
Increase participation of underrepresented members, staff, and/or faculty	4
Eliminate barriers to library programs, services, policies and practices	3
Develop strategy or policy on diversity and inclusion and/or anti-racism	3
Develop, review, and/or revise curriculum to include systemic racism	3
Support Black colleagues, students, and/or staff	2
Challenge classifications and subject headings	1
Create anti-Black racism working group	1
Review membership in affiliated organizations	1
Confront and resist problematic narratives and language	1
Establish bursary for BIPOC student	1
Recommend members revisit policies	1
Create mechanism for voluntary self-declaration of BIPOC members	1
Formalize an inclusive and equitable hiring policy	1

5. Discussion

Canadian libraries reported being inundated with requests for resources on anti-racism in the wake of the protests. While this demonstrates they are a largely trusted social organization, it also shows the vast structural, material, and social power of libraries to shape conversations on racial justice in the country. Institutional policies and actions that posit meaningful diversity and inclusivity are seemingly requisite in librarianship today. However, this study helps to explain why their effect is often negligible to those affected by racial inequity because the structural relations that underpin library organizations and relationships essentially remain unchanged (Espinal, Sutherland, & Roh, 2018; Hudson, 2017a; Hudson, 2017b; Schmidt, 2019). Almost condescendingly, Ahmed reminds us that there must be a further step – "for a commitment to do something, you must do something ''with it" (2012, 120). At the heart of her point is that commitments cannot alter structures. Rather, structures change when people become willing to acknowledge and redistribute the relations of power and privilege found within them.

Anecdotally, the response does appear meagre given the scale of events occurring at the time. Regardless, it is not within the scope of this study to speculate on organizational decisions to not issue a statement. However, it is worth underscoring that the community trust that libraries hold does behoove them to recognize and address racial oppression in the country. For example, a recent national study found that two-thirds of Canadians believe that the country fares better than the United States (Canadian Race Relations Foundation and Environics Institute 2019, 4). Yet, this perspective was easily troubled when three non-White Canadians died during police interactions in the month of June 2020 during the study period. Thus, while it is laudable that the

Canadian library community quickly responded to public outrage, there are equally disturbing questions that must be raised here in Canada too. Yet, only four statements included the names of racialized or Indigenous Canadians that were slain in interactions with Canadian police.

Further, it is alarming that there was scant interest in offering formal and measurable responses to the needs of Black communities as they witnessed enormous trauma. Concisely demonstrating Espinal, Sutherland, and Roh's point that a key problem of whiteness is how it "fosters homogenous attitudes and processes" that do not feel harmful to those with decision-making power and blinds them from identifying their role perpetuating structural problems (2018, 148). This is not a conscious decision to underserve Black communities or ignore their needs. Rather, it demonstrates the Ontario Government's point that anti-Black racism has become "so functionally normalized or rendered invisible to the white population" that it is unremarkable to ignore and systematically erase Black experiences and perspectives (2019, 67).

6. Conclusion

While the library community cannot right Floyd's death, we can do our part to undertake strategic action that serves to break systemic processes of oppression in our work. There is a profound difference between performing anti-racism and anti-racism. As we look to the future, we can no longer perform anti-racism through mission statements or values - we must be anti-racist institutions that reflect and demonstrate a commitment to all communities served.

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