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Arts & Humanities
Research Council

The right 'man' for the job?
The role of empathy
in community librarianship

Research Workshop

Wednesday 17 October 2007
Department of Information Studies
University of Sheffield



Workshop introduction



- Project overview
- Key concepts and definitions
- Relevance and timeliness of project
- Research methods
- Workshop overview.



Project overview



- Funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)
- Response to biannual 'open call'
- Kerry Wilson *Research Associate* (attached FT to project);
Briony Birdi *Principal Investigator* (university contract holder)
- March 2006 – February 2008
- Looking at public libraries in England only
- Aims and objectives in workshop report, pp.2-3.



Key concepts and definitions

Community librarianship: operational element of public library services that specifies working with community groups and/or the delivery of targeted services, e.g. outreach services, branch library positions

Social exclusion: political term applied to groups who are less able to engage in social, economic, cultural and political life due to a combination of factors, poverty often the common denominator. Also described as 'marginalised' or 'disadvantaged' social groups, social exclusion is a 'multi-dimensional outcome' of disadvantage'.



Key concepts and definitions (2)

Social exclusion (continued):

... a shorthand 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 environments, bad health and family breakdown.

Social Exclusion Unit, 1997

(now Social Exclusion Taskforce:

http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/)



Key concepts and definitions (3)

Empathy: a psychological construct with various definitions, based on three accepted 'dimensions' of empathy:

1. Cognitive or intellectual process – imagined understanding, perspective-taking
2. An intuitive response - based on emotional reaction and vicarious understanding of another's situation
3. Multi-dimensional definitions which combine or consider both cognitive and emotional elements.



Key concepts and definitions (4)

Empathy (continued):

Levenson and Ruef (1992) identified three different qualities of empathy:

- a) *knowing* what another person is feeling
 - b) *feeling* what another is feeling
 - c) *responding compassionately* to another person's [distress].
- This is the most helpful attempt to date to define and deconstruct the concept of empathy within a professional service context.



Why this project?

Making a valid contribution:

- Political pertinence – New Labour’s cohesive public policy approach to addressing social exclusion
- Public libraries and social impact research – gaps
- Staff as key stakeholders - overlooked
- Inspired and motivated by own experience of doing research with public library staff – observations made.



How are we doing it?

Research methods

- Review of the literature
- Job vacancy profiling
- National survey (quantitative)
- Focus groups and interviews (qualitative)
- Case studies x 10
- Research workshop.



Workshop overview

- **General responses to the preliminary report**

Participants in 3 groups (see handout) to discuss in more detail the 3 main themes of the report:

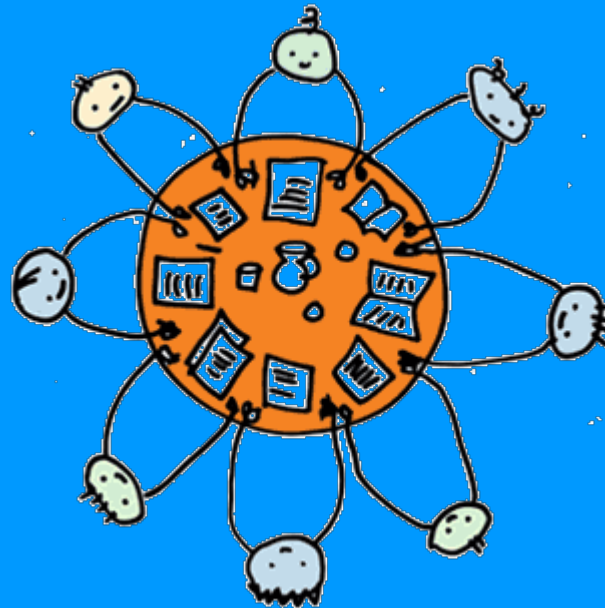
- 1) **Empathy and cultural representation**
- 2) **Social inclusion and community librarianship**
- 3) **Skills, partnerships and professional identity**

We would like to hear your opinion based on responses to our research and your own personal/professional experience.

N.B. Groups to feed back at 2.15.



Participant feedback:



Responses to the preliminary report



Response to the preliminary report: initial thoughts

Findings

- Shocked or pleasantly surprised?
- Recognise colleagues and staff in comments?

Research process overall

- Relevance of the research?
- Will public libraries be receptive?
- Can the research be applied in practice?



Afternoon session:



Workshop summary



Afternoon session:



What next for the project?



Remaining stages

- Analyse and incorporate workshop data
- Completion and inclusion of 10 case studies
- Ongoing research synthesis
- Report writing: to be submitted Feb '08
- Dissemination.



Contemporary climate – still relevant?

- Research itself revealing ongoing challenges for public library service!
- Still politically relevant: e.g. white paper on community cohesion and role of cultural services
- Comparison to other public sectors: lack of cultural diversity in local government; role strain, stress and long-term sick leave in other public/social services.



Contacts and information

We would welcome any further thoughts or feedback from you once you have digested and considered today's discussion!

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- **Briony Birdi: 0114 222 2653 b.birdi@sheffield.ac.uk**

More information on the research group can be found at <http://www.shef.ac.uk/is/research/centres/cplis>