



Library Service to Black Americans

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A CONSIDERABLE SEGMENT of Americans are considered "culturally disadvantaged," since they have inadequate educational, economic, or other types of opportunities. To adequately serve this important segment of our citizens, librarians should be familiar with research studies on the disadvantaged. Currently the term "culturally disadvantaged" is used to describe those Americans who belong to subcultures which are different from and generally less advanced than the dominant culture. The term has also been used to refer to all those Americans who belong to the lower socio-economic group and who are disadvantaged in the sense that they have fewer opportunities than the average American. Bloom, *et al.*, define the culturally disadvantaged as one-third of the high school entrants who do not complete their secondary education, including both natives of America's urban and rural areas and "in-migrants" from Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the rural South.¹ Johnson suggests five types of American citizens as being disadvantaged and in need of services: the young—particularly the school dropouts under twenty-one years of age; the old—people over sixty-five; the people who are functionally illiterate and who may be anywhere along the age spectrum; the "new immigrants" who move from rural areas and small towns into urban areas; and the Negroes, who make up the majority in each of the other four groups.²

These groups are not, of course, mutually exclusive. They represent useful ways of looking at some of the common attributes of large numbers of people in terms of their motives, backgrounds, habits, and hopes or fears for the future.

What is the nature of the library's responsibility toward the culturally deprived? This is a question that demands both an intellectual response and emotional involvement, but the very terminology used in

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approaching this question may create problems of understanding. One may have misgivings about the ready use of a vocabulary, including such terms as "culturally deprived" and "disadvantaged." Frank Riessman has indicated that the culture of poverty may contain assets as well as handicaps,³ and Kenneth Clark has warned against an apparent solicitude for the "disadvantaged" which actually cloaks a patronizing attitude.⁴

In *Dark Ghetto*, Clark condemns the stereotyped thinking that too often is expressed regarding such labels as "culturally deprived."⁵ A sense of reality is needed to solve problems that are bitterly real, and a vision that concentrates exclusively on the negative aspects of the disadvantaged leads to defeat. Riessman's *The Culturally Deprived Child*³ reminds one that there may be much of worth in the disadvantaged person's experience and environment. Awareness of this worth and potential may ward off a holier-than-thou attitude that desires "salvation" for the culturally impoverished individual and at the same time creates a feeling of blind contempt for everything about his environment and culture. In this rejection of the environment and values, is there not also a danger of rejecting the individual?

Who are the disadvantaged? Although it would be impossible to determine the exact proportion of Americans who are culturally disadvantaged, one can get some idea by observing the figures on income and education, since both poverty and limited education are associated with cultural disadvantage. A report issued by the Conference on Economic Progress indicates the following:

In 1960 more than 77 million Americans, or more than two-fifths of a nation, lived in poverty or deprivation.

In poverty were almost 10½ million multiple-person families with annual incomes under \$4,000, and almost 4 million unattached individuals with annual incomes under \$2,000—approximately 38 million Americans or more than one-fifth of a nation.

In deprivation, above poverty but short of minimum requirements for a modestly comfortable level of living, there were almost 10½ million families with incomes from \$4,000 to just under \$6,000, and more than 2 million unattached individuals with incomes from \$2,000 to just under \$3,000—more than 39 million Americans, or also more than one-fifth of a nation.⁶

In 1960 out of over 99 million persons of 25 years old and over, more than eight million adults had completed less than five years of schooling; more than 13 million had completed five to seven years; and more than 17 million had completed eight years. To state it another way, in 1960 about 40 percent of American adults had only eight years of edu-

Service to Black Americans

cation or less.⁷ In 1963, 15.5 million heads of American families (or one-third of the total) had completed only eight years or less of education.⁸ There probably have not been any significant changes in 1971.

The number of disadvantaged is constantly increasing in large cities. According to the report issued by the Educational Policies Commission, there has been a "large-scale migration" of the disadvantaged rural population from the "agrarian South, Southwest and Puerto Rico" to large urban centers of the United States.⁹ Riessman, in discussing the fact that the proportion of large-city children who are deprived is constantly increasing, stated: "In 1950, approximately one child out of every ten in the fourteen largest cities of the United States was 'culturally deprived.' By 1960, this figure had risen to one in three. . . . By 1970, it is estimated there may be one deprived child for every two enrolled in schools in these larger cities."¹⁰

There is some correlation between cultural disadvantage and race. Riessman states, "A large portion of the current disadvantaged population is composed of cultural and racial minorities."¹¹ Benjamin McKendall posits that cultural disadvantage is primarily a Negro problem: "In the South, and in most urban areas of the North, cultural disadvantage is primarily a Negro problem. Other groups—Mexican-Americans along the border states and in California; Puerto Ricans in New York; the American Indian in the Southwest; the indigent white of Appalachia and the rural South—also have been adversely affected by these forces, but the American Negro is more visible, and, with the thrust of the civil rights movement, more vocal."¹²

The black American revolution is rightly regarded as the most important domestic event of the postwar period in the United States. Nothing like it has occurred since the upheavals of the 1930s which led to the organization of the great trade unions, and which profoundly changed both the economical and political scene in America. There have been few other events in our history—the American Revolution itself, the surge of Jacksonian Democracy in the 1830s, the anti-slavery movement, and the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century—comparable to the current interest in the black experience.

There has been none more important. The black revolution holds forth the prospect that the American Republic, which at birth was flawed by the institution of black slavery and which throughout its history has been marred by unequal treatment of its black citizens, will at last redeem the full promise of the Declaration of Independence.

The major events of the onset of the black revolution are now behind

us. There were three political events: the Negroes themselves organized as a mass movement; the Kennedy-Johnson administrations committed the federal government to the cause of black equality; and the 1964 presidential election was practically a referendum on this commitment. Similarly the administrative events were threefold: beginning with the establishment of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity and the enactment of the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962, the federal government launched a major national effort to redress the great imbalance between the economic position of the Negro citizens and the rest of the nation; the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 began a major onslaught on poverty, a condition in which almost the majority of black families are living; and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and subsequent voting acts marked the end of the era of legal and formal discrimination against Negroes and created important new machinery for combating covert discrimination and unequal treatment. The legal events were no less specific. Beginning with *Brown vs Board of Education* in 1954, through the decade that culminated in the recent decisions upholding the Civil Rights Act, the federal courts, led by the Supreme Court, have used every opportunity to combat unequal treatment of black people.

The principal challenge of the next phase of the black revolution is to make sure that equality of results now will follow. If they do not, there are few prospects for social peace in the United States for generations. The time is at hand for an unflinching look at the present potential of black Americans to move from where they are now to where they want and ought to be.

There is no satisfactory way, at present, to measure social health or social psychology within an ethnic, religious or geographical community. Data are few and inconclusive, and conclusions drawn from them are subject to the grossest error. It has to be stated that there is a considerable body of evidence to support the conclusion that Negro social structure, harassed by discrimination and battered by injustice and uprooting, is in the deepest trouble. While many young blacks are moving ahead to unprecedented levels of achievement, many more are falling further and further behind.

After an intensive study of the life of central Harlem, the board of directors of Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, summed up their findings in one statement: "Massive deterioration of the fabric of society and its institutions is indicated by . . . this study."¹³ It is the conclusion of this survey of the available national data that what is true of

Service to Black Americans

central Harlem can be said to be true of the black American world in general. If this is so, it is the single most important social fact of the United States today.

It might be estimated that as much as half of the black community falls into the middle class. However, the remaining half is in desperate and deteriorating circumstances. Because of housing patterns it is immensely difficult for the stable half to escape from the cultural influences of the unstable half. The children of middle class Negroes often as not must grow up in or next to the slums, an experience almost unknown to white middle class children. They are therefore constantly exposed to the pathology of the disturbed group and constantly in danger of being drawn into it. In a word, most black youths are in danger of being caught up in a tangle of pathology that affects their world, and probably a majority are so entrapped.

Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the black American. At present, the tangle of social pathology is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world. The cycle can be broken only if these distortions are set right.

Library service of a relevant nature may be one means of setting these distortions straight and assisting in untangling the social pathology. Until roughly 1950, the shape, the form, the size, and the political and economical organization of all but the largest cities were highly conducive to social, political, and economic mobility. The political parties in the old central cities were the political bases of the nation. The public library and other cultural institutions were local and in the central city, and accessible because they were local and central. In these institutions people partook of the dominant middle class culture, learned its values and norms, and entered the mainstream. The institutions of economic activity—the factories, banks, mercantile establishments—were also in the central cities and accessible to all. Until 1950, the physical scale of the city allowed the easy, unplanned access of everyone to everything.

About twenty years ago—at different times in different places—the scales tipped and differentiation happened. The change was swift and drastic. It occurred in the wake of the wholesale migration to the cities and explosive population trends following World War II.

Like most migrants before him, the new urban migrant of recent decades was poor—that is why he came to the city. He was the product of a different culture. He was a descendent of slaves and visible, as none

before him, by his black skin. For all these reasons, and uniquely for the latter, he was to find entry into the mainstream difficult and frequently impossible.

The rapid dispersion of the white urban population has been joined by parallel dispersions of mercantile establishments, and most importantly, of high quality urban services, especially schools. The new migrants became numerous enough to have their own schools in the traditional pattern of neighborhood facilities, their own mercantile establishments and service institutions, not in ethnic ownership, but in the sense of neighborhood location. The color line held on most jobs, and only began to give way in the late 1960s. The color bar also operated in the urban housing market which psychologically and physically bound all Negroes to the urban ghettos.

The dispersion of whites and the ghettoization of blacks reinforce a century-old habit of non-contact, non-communication, and non-awareness between the races. This has produced the Ellison "invisible man" syndrome.¹⁴

Gradually our central cities are becoming isolated, walled-off ghettos of uniformly restricted opportunity for a significant portion of our population. An unfortunate atmosphere is created—an atmosphere of fear, suspicion, antagonism, frustration, misunderstanding and mutual ignorance of life styles and aspirational values.

No longer can we discuss the problems of the central city without making the central theme the consequences of ghettoization of blacks. We cannot discuss these problems without paying close attention to the phenomena of white dispersion and black containment. We cannot discuss serving the unserved in our central cities without focusing on the black community and its complex requirements, because the central city of the future, unless drastic changes occur, will be black in its voting majority, in its politics and political decision-making apparatus, in the fabric of its neighborhood society, and in the clientele of its public (and some private) institutions.¹⁵

Hyman Bookbinder suggests that American libraries do not hold the answer to poverty in America, and neither does the educational system by itself hold the answer to poverty, nor housing or urban renewal. "The answer is that all of them together constitute the answer to poverty, because poverty is both the result of many social factors and forces and the cause of many social problems and new social causes. Unless we work on all of them, that vicious cycle of poverty cannot be interrupted."¹⁶

Service to Black Americans

The civil rights movement has focused much attention on the functionally illiterate. How can libraries reach these people—a great many of whom are black—with their present programs? John Berry quotes James Farmer's suggestion that libraries must develop new techniques and materials; the use of newly trained readers to teach other illiterates; and the recruitment of high school dropouts as library aides in culturally deprived areas.¹⁷

Eric Moon feels that the federal government should give thought to establishing a free book program for the needy in the same spirit as the school lunch program; Hubert Humphrey concurs in this idea.¹⁸ Moon also feels that librarians in the culturally deprived areas can learn much from the experiences of Peace Corp volunteers, UNESCO workers, and AID personnel about working with the poor and the semi-literate.¹⁹

"The white institutions of the central city (prominent among which are the public libraries) that aspire to serve central city clientele [blacks] must adopt organizational behavior patterns similar to any organization that wants to attract a new clientele."²⁰ Libraries must have the staff who know, or learn to appreciate and respect, the values and aspirations of the community of which their clientele is a part. Libraries must respond to the values and aspirations of the community in the form of concrete programs and services. Libraries and librarians have always been sensitive to a great degree to the demands of white middle class America, but white librarians are not and never will be as sensitive to the black community's demands precisely because they are not a part of that community. "Serving the heterogeneous black community of the central city cannot be according to traditional white norms, traditional white habits, and traditional white objectives."²⁰

The most relevant role librarians can play in serving black Americans is that of helping them develop the ability to help themselves. Kenneth Clark believes that blacks "themselves must eventually be the instruments through which change in their predicament is brought about. . . . These people must be taken seriously. They must be respected for their humanity and for their creative potentials."²¹ He further states that "librarians themselves may have to demonstrate to those public schools who will not listen that, in spite of educators' explanations for why these children cannot be taught to read, when they are accepted, when they are approached as human beings and not as poor underprivileged or Negro children, they not only can learn but, like other human beings who are exposed to acceptance, they too can learn to love and to cher-

ish, and probably some day even to write, books."²² Clark continues and offers the example of Arthur Schomburg and the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library as an instance of the role that a relevant library program played in a crucial period of his life.

A sense of future dictates to Conant that the central city institutions which come within the purview and influence of local government will become what the political leadership of the majority want them to be.²⁰ The black unserved masses of the present-day will be served as they wish to be served within a few years after their voting strengths produce local political leadership from within their ranks. Black political leaders of the future will aggressively reorient libraries toward black history, culture, art, and politics in the interests of reestablishing a black identity, self-esteem, and new tradition. Whites cannot help in this future effort and blacks know it, even if whites do not. Black mayors and black library administrators will be less interested in the participation of city-supported libraries in a metropolitan library system. Prestige library institutions of the future, with sophisticated research collections, should now begin to capture the interest of their "new bosses" by offering programs with inner-city purposes. Library schools should look to new curricular offerings in line with institutional changes in metropolitan library developments. Librarians must change.

Unquestionably blacks need help. They need help to develop and to grow to their full potential as human beings. They need help in developing those skills which are essential for providing a realistic basis for pride and self-respect. Blacks can be given the help and encouragement to help themselves only by those who have sufficient self-respect to respect them. One of the most important roles which libraries can play in a relevant context is to provide for blacks that human acceptance, unqualified by their present racial and economic status.

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Service to Black Americans

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