From Buns to Batgirl: The Changing Image of the Librarian

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Abstract:

The image of the librarian has changed much since the first librarian's positions at Ivy League schools in the mid- to late-17th Century. The purpose of this paper is to explore the history and origins of male and female stereotypes of librarians as well as generational stereotypes. Stereotypes in the literature of the field were explored and categorized. During the course of the research, the conclusion was reached that stereotypes do indeed exist and are detrimental to the field and to the professionals in the field. Because negative images are potentially detrimental to librarians and to the fields of library and information science, this paper also covers some possible solutions and steps to take against stereotyping. The paper also discusses some possible solutions to aid in the transition as a new generation of librarians enters the workforce.

Introduction:

Librarians worry about their outward image perhaps more than any other professional, but this may be partly because they have been trying longer than any other professional to break away from stereotypes. The purpose of this paper is to examine the origins of librarian stereotypes and discuss two of these stereotypes – gender (including male and female librarian stereotypes) and generational. This topic is an extremely

important one because negative images have the potential to be harmful to librarians, libraries, and the field of library and information science. This topic is also a timely one because librarians' roles – and thus, images – are changing perhaps now more than ever due to the incorporation of technology into these roles and into the services offered by libraries. Therefore, this paper will also discuss some possible solutions to the problem of stereotyping and image or role confusion.

Origins of Librarian Stereotyping:

Gary Mason Church posits that the image of the librarian comes from several sources including "direct interaction with librarians, hearsay, and media portrayals of librarians" (2002, 6). He also points out that many aspects of a librarian's image are based on "abstract ideas of what a librarian should be" (2002, 6). As proof of the discrepancy between reality and image, Church quotes a couple of sources, the first a columnist, S. Johnson, writing for the *Chicago Tribune* in 1990. Church quotes Johnson as saying that "instead of the inaccurate image of librarians as either 'meek, underpaid, overly fussy old ladies' or 'cops who happen to understand the Dewey Decimal System,' a librarian is more accurately 'an outspoken, extraordinarily well-educated civil libertarian who also is a technological whiz and might very well be male'" (Church 2002, 7). He quotes Leigh and Sewny's (1960) account of a Harvard University professor's statement of what librarianship has to offer "'single ladies'" (Church 2002, 7). The professor goes on to point out that not all librarians are single women, "'but enough of them are to rank librarians with school teachers, YWCA secretaries, and social workers

as persons less likely to go to nightclubs than are receptionists or department store buyers'" (Church 2002, 7).

Some images are created by the librarian's own sense of self. Church quotes Holbrook's (1968) discussion of Robert Douglass's work. Douglass felt that librarians criticized themselves and each other far more strenuously than did people outside the profession. He quotes G. A. DeCandido (1999) as saying that she and her peers decided on librarianship as a profession because of a love of words, ideas, and the worlds inside books (Church 2002, 8). "For many of us," DeCandido says, "librarianship originally was a choice to separate ourselves from workplaces that were less humane, less involved in the drama of people's lives" (Church 2002, 8).

This component of the librarian as bookworm always and people-person sometimes goes back even farther, Church says. He cites M. Biggs's (1981) comments that the librarians who "began to emerge slowly in the nineteenth century [mostly] remained 'bookmen' at heart and [were] more interested in enriching the library than in systematizing it and facilitating its use" (Church 2002, 10). Biggs, he said, also quotes Lloyd P. Smith of the Philadelphia Library Company as saying that "the first requisite for success in our vocation is…a natural love for books" (Church 2002, 10.)

This self-image is supported by a questionnaire and personality tests conducted by Douglass in which he concluded that librarians were "more orderly, meticulous, neat and compulsive in behavior" than other people (Church 2002, 12). Douglass also used descriptors such as "more conscientious, scrupulous, and conforming, and less innovative and creative…more deferential, submissive, and respectful of authority…more self-contained, self-sufficient, preoccupied with subjective feelings, introspective, introverted,

and non-social" (Church 2002, 12). Regarding gender, Douglass found that the "male

librarian is more feminine in his interest than men in general" (Church 2002, 12). Church

cites another Douglass remark that "'many of the traits which characterize the modal

librarian…are not those most closely associated with or productive of forceful leadership,

distinguished scholarship, imaginative research, or other highly creative attainments'"

(Church 2002, 12).

Marie and Gary Radford also question the origins of librarian stereotypes.

According to the authors, researchers have tried to determine whether librarians do, in

fact, possess the "traits attributed to them by the stereotype" (1997, 251) and "whether

the library profession happens to attract these sorts of people" (1997, 251). The

conclusion was that there is a prevalent stereotype, but the authors could find nothing

about how to change it (1997, 251).

Church concludes from the literature that the image of the librarian has changed

and continues to change, depending "on who defines it" (2002, 20). He says that some of

the aspects are "subjective opinions…of the traits librarians either *do* (his emphasis)

have…or *should* (his emphasis) have," (2002, 21), but that the stereotypes themselves

have also come to define the image.

Male Stereotypes:

Stereotypes of female librarians are far more common than those of male

librarians, and Thad E. Dickinson postulates that this trend is partly due to the fact that

the "majority of librarians are, in fact, women" (2002, 98). Dickinson cites a 1998 study

in which 79 percent of public librarians were women and 69 percent of academic

librarians were women (2002, 98). So, like Church, Dickinson has explored the idea that part of the librarian image might, in fact, come from direct interaction with librarians. Like Church also, Dickinson recognizes the tendency of stereotypes to color true image. Dickinson also recognizes the fact that image is fluid, in that one stereotype can remain even after a new one develops. Stereotypes of male librarians remain today, he says, even though those of female librarians are now more prevalent.

Historically, librarians were mostly male, academic librarians, remaining so until the last half of the 1800s (Dickinson 2002, 98). Dickinson cites Jody Newmyer's statements that before 1870, the librarian was thought to be "'grim, grouchy, eccentric, and male'" (Dickinson 2002, 98). He cites Arnold Sable as saying that the male librarian of this time was a "'bibliophile, a pale, undernourished man who lived only for his books'" (Dickinson 2002, 98).

These stereotypes may have come from the job itself, he says, citing for example that "the responsibilities and duties of the American colonial librarian were few in number and far from glamorous" (Dickinson 2002, 99). Dickinson writes that "the early American librarian contented himself with sweeping the library floor, dusting and arranging the books, and airing the library once a week" (2002, 100). It's no wonder that librarians performed these menial tasks, since "virtually every library had closed stacks until well into the nineteenth century, making access to the collection by anyone other than the library keeper extremely unlikely" (Dickinson 2002, 100).

Even open stacks were often of limited availability. Dickinson gives the account of Samual Stoddard's experience as Harvard College librarian in 1667, in which trustees gave Stoddard specific rules that severely restricted the use of the collection; for example,

the library was open only three hours daily and only professors could borrow books. This miserly image became associated with the librarian, of course, and not the trustees. Furthermore, librarians were often ordered to collect all materials for inventory monthly and even to pay for books that were unaccounted for at the end of their careers (Dickinson 2002, 99), so it made financial sense to curb usage.

Brad McDonald suggests that image is consistently derived from duties. The image of the dull librarian, he says, "is linked with the prevailing public view that librarianship consists largely of insipid hours spent shelving books, stamping cards, and other such seemingly mindless tasks" (1995, 40); this misconception might partly come from the fact that these tasks are the ones seen by the public most of the time, and many times, the person seen doing them are not actually even librarians. McDonald quotes White as saying, "'The public assumes… that anyone who works in a library is a librarian' (McDonald 1995, 40-1). McDonald says this perception is a "reinforcement of the notion that librarians are minimally trained and must face a numbingly boring daily routine" (1995, 41).

Radford and Radford also support the idea that some elements of the image may, in fact, be based on the librarian's duties or the role of the library itself. The stereotype "does not exist in a cultural vacuum…It meshes with portrayals and literary uses of the library institution …The librarian's role can be understood in terms of responsibility for a system where every text has its proper place…The *ideal library* (their emphasis) is one that is never used or disrupted. Order becomes the end in itself" (1997, 255-6).

Male stereotypes began to change when American women entered the workforce in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Libraries could pay women lower wages and

assign them the more mundane library tasks once given to men (Dickinson 2002, 103). Men then advanced to more prestigious library positions. A result "was the creation of a profession where men, though in the minority, held most of the higher salaried, administrative positions within America's libraries" (Dickinson 2002, 104). The progression was slow, but by 1870, Dickinson writes, women held 43 of 213 American library positions, and 11 percent of the people attending the 1876 convention of the American Library Association were women (Dickinson 2002, 104).

Perhaps the profession became feminized because there are certainly fewer higher paid positions than there are lower paid positions, the positions that women were occupying. Perhaps, as Dickinson suggests, it is because the profession was seen as a "natural extension of the supposedly inherent feminine qualities of spirituality, housekeeping, and a willingness to help others" (2002, 104). Whatever the reason, Dickinson writes that by the turn of the century, 75 percent of American librarians were women (2002, 104). The profession had become women's work. Consequently, men, less willing to become librarians, began an exodus from the field (Dickinson 2002, 105). Men took fewer library positions not only because of the saturation of women into the field, but because they might be seen as unable to provide financially for their families with such low pay compared to other "men's" fields (Dickinson 2002, 105). Dickinson further reports that "subordinate positions such as reference librarian were thought to lack the intellectual rigor that characterized the male-dominated professions of law and medicine" (2002, 105). Dickinson does not draw any conclusions as to whether the low pay and perception of low intellectual status had anything to do with women's domination of the field.

Recruitment efforts in the 1940s targeted men, "emphasizing a steady income, job security, and 'community respect,'" says Dickinson (2002, 105-06), and in the 1950s, more men took library positions. In the last quarter of the twentieth and the first years of the twenty-first century, Dickinson says, the male librarian image lost much of its femininity, perhaps because "American society has redefined masculinity" (2002, 106).

Sjoerd Vogt suggests another stereotype as an explanation of the new, more masculine male librarian – that of the power-hungry, political man. He quotes two university Library and Information Science professionals in discussing dean's positions and, to some extent, top library jobs in general. Quoting the University of South Florida's Kathleen de la Pena McCook, Vogt writes that "if women show the same behaviors as men, then they can and will get the same jobs" (2003, 23). McCook goes on to say that "power has become very much a part of the equation" (2003, 24), partly because of technology, and she calls the power play between library schools "an attractive playground for men" (Vogt 2003, 24). According to Vogt, the ALISE statistics show that information science courses are made up of 30 percent women, while library science courses include 70 percent women. He quotes Virginia Commonwealth University's Sarah Watstein as saying that "we need to change the stereotypes. Male domination of IT inevitably leads to salary issues, and we must therefore change social attitudes through education" (Vogt 2003, 24).

Female Stereotypes:

Early stereotypes of female librarians are also not complimentary. According to Radford and Radford, Arnold Sable reports a stereotype for female librarians as negative

as the one quoted in Dickinson for male librarians. This stereotypical female librarian "is 'unfailingly and eternally middle-aged, unmarried, and most uncommunicative. She exists to put a damper on all spontaneity, silencing the exuberance of the young with a harsh look or hiss. Her only task seems to be checking out books and collecting fines'" (1997, 253).

Radford and Radford say that the "'librarian as old maid' is a prevalent image…It has appeared and continues to appear in a large variety of cultural forms…." (1997, 253), but newer research suggests that the female image of the librarian is becoming more positive, much like the male stereotype has. Again, the changes in the image may be due to the newer image of the library itself. Elyse Kroll says that the "image of the librarian has been revamped and modernized over the past few decades, as has the job itself" (2004, 17). The "stereotype of the old-maid librarian" as seen in Frank Capra's Mary Hatch from *It's a Wonderful Life* has "not withstood the test of time," Kroll says (2004, 17).

Now, Kroll says, female librarians have a much more positive image in the media. She uses DC Comics' Barbara Gordon and her alter ego, Batgirl, as an example. Barbara is Gotham City's head librarian, but "when crime strikes, she lets her hair down, trades her twinset and pearls for a skin-tight unitard and thigh-high stiletto books, and kicks arch-villain butt" (Kroll 2004, 18). One might say that it's Batgirl who is exciting, but Kroll points out that her librarian personality "is no shrinking violet. She's an independent career woman who has a photographic memory (something even Batman doesn't possess!), a brown belt in judo, and her own motorcycle" (2004, 18).

Doug Highsmith also points out Barbara's triumphs. He writes, "Moreover, Barbara is no humble possessor of an MLS degree – she is *Dr.* (his emphasis) Barbara Gordon, proud possessor of a Ph.D. in library science" (2002, 77). He points out that Gotham City is modeled after New York City – so the main library would be large and its head librarian, important.

But Highsmith also questions whether Barbara's attributes are entirely positive, pointing out that she is "shown wearing glasses…. Her hair is tied up tightly in a bun. And she's wearing traditional conservative – not to say dowdy – clothing. In other words, she embodies the stereotypical image of the female librarian of the day…" (2002, 78). And, he says, though the Gotham City library must have "a multi-million-volume collection, a multi-million-dollar budget, and a staff that probably numbers in the hundreds…[Gordon is] shown reshelving books and working at the Circulation Counter…" (2002, 78).

Kroll, however, says that Barbara Gordon is a superhero nonetheless, and she goes on to cite other positive examples in the media – Tori Amos's album *Tales of a Librarian*, the aspiring librarian in the reality TV show *Breaking the Mold: The Kee Malesky Story*, and the controversial action figure modeled after real-life librarian Nancy Pearl. Though many have criticized the doll's dowdy looks and shushing action, most who have seen the real Nancy Pearl agree that the doll is a true representation and not a stereotype. Pearl herself had perhaps one of the best comments for those who are upset over the doll when she "told the Seattle Times that 'the role of a librarian is to make sense of the world of information. If that's not a qualification for superhero-dom, what is?'" (Kroll 2004, 20).

From gender gaps to generation gaps:

According to Rachel Singer Gordon, librarians often find themselves stuck between these extremes when it comes to image and age issues as well; the image of the profession can be a tug-of-war between "Hello Kitty earrings vs. power suits, Doc Martens vs. Easy Spirits, ripped punk T-shirts vs. subtly patterned ties" (2004, 52). Gordon says that younger librarians' tendency to focus on image as a "defining generational characteristic" (2004, 52) puts them at risk of promoting stereotypes as much as those outside the profession. She asks, "Can we stand another article in the general press that trumpets the amazing new discovery that librarians can be young, trendy, stylish?" (2004, 52).

Gordon's theory is that younger librarians' need to be hip and trendy comes directly from their need to break away from an older stereotype of the profession, but then there is the risk of creating a new stereotype. "When we define ourselves against their ingrained image of our sensibly shod-and-bunned elders, we fall into stereotype ourselves. When we say, 'We're not like them,' we feed into the idea of Marian as the norm, nextgen as the exception. This is hardly a good start for intergenerational collaboration and collegiality," (Gordon 2004, 52).

Solutions:

The following comments from Church refer to the image of the academic librarian vs. support staff, but the comments ring true of librarianship in general. Church quotes Oberg, Schleiter, and Houten (1989) as saying that "'the task before librarians today is to

make the invisible visible. They must settle upon their role, perform it consistently, and communicate it unambiguously…to be understood and valued by their communities'" (Church 2002, 22). Thirteen years later, Church points out that this method may not work now. Technological change impacts libraries, and the resulting transitional period impacts librarians as well. This period is "characterized by confusion, fear, and uncertainty about the exact role of libraries and librarians in the future," (Church 2002, 22), and makes settling upon a role difficult. "Today," Church says, "transition and uncertainty distort the librarian's image so it is unclear to them as well as others" (2002, 23).

The image issue is a danger to the entire field of librarianship. McDonald brings the risks to the forefront when he writes that "damaging stereotypes of librarians serve to sap out self-esteem, impede our initiative, mar our credibility, diminish our respect within the community, and discourage new recruits from entering the profession" (1995, 41). If a reluctance of new graduates to enter the field is not enough, there is also the danger of a manipulation of *which* graduates to encourage into the field. McDonald writes that "it has been observed that some academic guidance counselors tend to direct students who demonstrate characteristics of timidity, tidiness or bookishness toward a career in librarianship when what is really needed for success in the field is assertiveness and extraordinary interpersonal communication skills" (1995, 44).

Because the image of the librarian sometimes tends to be connected with the building in which he or she works, McDonald feels that one solution is a "positive library image which surely projects a favorable image upon the acting librarians and support staff" (1995, 46). He suggests architecture, style and interior design and décor worthy of

the librarian's real image because a "drab and stuffy facility reinforces the stereotype of the library as a boring place operated by dull people" (1995, 46).

Gordon says the key to collegiality between the generations is building an "image based on who we are, where librarian is only one factor, rather than in opposition to who we would rather not be" (2004, 52). She advises that people entering the profession compare their potential working environment to their priorities. She warns that an environment that "fails to match or accommodate your external image may also fail to match your internal image of yourself as a library professional, or to align with your priorities and philosophy" (2004, 52). If the person is already in a position and feels stifled, Gordon suggests finding small modes of personal expression – in jewelry, ties or messages on T-shirts beneath sweaters. This smaller expression allows one to balance a desire for respect with the need for uniqueness.

John Berry suggests that Baby Boomers let go of their idea – based on themselves – of what a librarian should be. "That means you'll have to interact with the newer crowd, get used to their costumes, their body decorations, and their attitudes… Letting go means showing respect to these new librarians, their styles, and especially their ideas about how we can improve library service," (2004, 12) he says. He goes on to say that mentoring is one of the best ways to pass the torch, so to speak. He says that "new librarians, just like the current leaders, treasure the relationships they have developed with their mentors" (2004, 12).

Automation Librarian Steve Casburn at the University on Hudson says basically the same thing in an interview with American Libraries editor Leonard Kniffel. "I think

it's really a far better thing to listen to one person, know that one person, mentor that one person, than to preach to a whole generation" (Kniffel 2004, 44).

Conclusion:

The stereotype of the frumpy spinster with a bun, peering at frightened children over her spectacles, gnarled hands with big joints tightly gripping a date due stamp is a thing of the past. So is the pale, wispy, quiet man with his nose stuck in a tattered, musty book, doggedly looking up information by an old brass lamp on his worn, wooden desk. Librarians are different from other professionals, and they are different from each other. As any online program in library science will prove, librarians do not fit any one mold. With technology bringing such changes to the way librarians serve their patrons, discord between librarians is potentially even more harmful to the field as well as to the librarians and patrons. One would do well to take the advice of Gordon, Berry, and Casburn. Mentoring and common sense compromises are some of the best ways to ensure a smooth transition between generations and personality types while presenting a united front against those who promote both generational and gender stereotypes.

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