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By Heidi Blackburn, PhD

Introduction

According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (USBLS) (2012), the library profession has seen a 48% (19,458) increase in males working in libraries since 1980 and the male influx is expected to increase (Minnesota, 2011) despite lingering professional stereotypes. Movies, books, and other popular media focus on the overall image of the librarian, as if only one type exists for both sexes (Duke, 1999; Garcia, 2011). These stereotypes may be misinterpreted on the faulty premise that men confront the same stereotypes in the library workplace as women. Social roles and norms are different for men and women and men joining a traditionally feminine profession face different levels of prejudice than do women (Williams, 1991). Society sees librarianship as "women's work," and anyone associated with it must be female or feminine. Men in nontraditional professions such as nursing and librarianship have become easy targets for stereotyping, creating a vicious cycle. Men assume the stereotypes are valid, they avoid taking the jobs, and the profession continues to see fewer males entering the workforce, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of low employment rates.

Library science literature is replete with opinion pieces on the topic of men working in libraries (Gordon, 2004; Holland, 2007; Tennant, 2006) but it lacks a substantive foundation of empirical research regarding stereotypes. In a recent study conducted at Emporia State University, male participants reported negative stereotyping by both the profession and the public. Study participants were enrolled in a mix of traditional LIS programs (84%) and iSchools (16%). The focus was on Millennials (participants born after 1980), resulting in 231 responses. The racial profile of the group was White/Caucasian (84%), African American (1%), Hispanic (3%), Asian (5%), Pacific Islander (0%), Other (3%), and Multiracial (3%). Additionally, 21 participants volunteered for follow-up semi-structured interviews. In total, 75 individual responses (combined from open-ended survey questions and individual interviews) mentioned specific negative male librarian stereotypes, instances of the participant being negatively stereotyped by the public, or instances of being negatively stereotyped in the workplace by colleagues. (See the complete study here.)

Gender roles

Some of the reported stereotypes overlap and are based on gender roles associated with men and women by society and others are based on gender roles assigned to male and female librarians. Participants stated another outside person, such as a peer, classmate, patron, family member, or friend, had negatively stereotyped men as librarians. Reports were made of instances where gender was a distinct factor in the decision to delegate a task to a male or female library employee. Participants noted assigned tasks were not only based on real or perceived physical capabilities, but also sometimes, the roles men were expected to play in society, such as "protector." Something as simple as assuming the male colleague would protect female colleagues from confrontational patrons or that he should do all the heavy physical labor caused frustration for many participants. Such stereotyping within the profession is damaging to employees, and can lead to self-esteem issues, anxiety, and in fighting among professionals (Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014). Male librarians who worked with youth services faced an additional facet to stereotyping, and may be polarized by the communities they serve.

Negative stereotypes

The negative stereotypes encountered by male Millennials in this study focused on librarianship as a feminized profession and the male librarian as a know-it-all. There is a spectrum of male librarian stereotypes spanning from those held within the profession to those held by society. Specific negative stereotypes centered on personality traits: socially awkward, antisocial, very quiet/introverted, intellectual/know-it-all, prudish/uptight, and not good at communicating. Stereotypical male librarians also wear glasses, are constantly telling patrons to be quiet through shushing, and favor comic books, videogames, and computer programming. This study also uncovered two preconceptions associated with intellectual prowess about men working in libraries: the male librarian must be an administrator and/or he must be proficient at technology use.

Homosexual stereotypes

This study did not use stereotyping prompts and not a single participant mentioned a stereotype regarding homosexuality or associating being a male librarian with being gay. Male participants may have filtered their interview responses to a female interviewer to meet cultural norms. This raises questions for future research, most importantly, whether or not the homosexual stereotype associated with male librarians has truly disappeared. Clearly, more research into the specific stereotyping faced by professional librarians of both genders is needed.

Conclusion

Men joining a non-traditional profession face different levels of prejudice than their female counterparts. Even casually, labeling draws a deeper line

between male and female librarians. One survey participant summed up the outrage over such slang, "Can the term 'guybrarian' just go die in a fiery pit?" This acknowledgement does not belittle or devalue the stereotypes faced by women in the profession in all types of library settings and hierarchies. It is time to shift views of men and women in librarianship from the perspective of stereotypes and inequality to a holistic one that reflects the communities it serves. Negative stereotypes and social attitudes about professional male librarians, both in and outside the profession, need to change. Until there is complete gender equality and new social constructs for masculine and feminine work, there is still much to be explored regarding men in libraries and work to be done to demolish these stereotypes.

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