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Factors Influencing Male Millennials to Become Professional Librarians

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Abstract

This case study investigates factors influencing Millennial men to become professional librarians. A grounded theory study was conducted using Kanter's theory of "tokenism" to frame an investigation of factors influencing men's decisions to enroll in library and information science graduate programs. The central framework investigates how tokenism explains the presence of Millennial males currently enrolled in library and information science graduate programs with the goal to become professional librarians.

Theory

Kanter's (1977b) theory of tokenism forms the basis of this study by applying it to a workplace situation, men in the library, an area not previously studied through this theoretical lens. Kanter (1977b) asserts every group and work setting has a group of *dominants*, composed of people who share similar characteristics. The opposite group, *tokens*, signifies people who cannot be categorized with the dominant group, and are "treated as representatives of their category, as symbols rather than individuals" (Kanter, 1977a, p. 966). Whether they choose to or not, they represent their ascribed category and can never be just another member of the group if their category remains rare. If the group is small, the token may even be a solitary individual or *solo* (Kanter, 1977b).

Kanter's theory (1977b) identified two conditions that cause the token to become more visible in the workplace: 1) the token's social category (master status) is physically obvious, such as gender or race and 2) the token's social type is rare or new to the setting of the dominants. The theory implies that uniform groups have only one kind of person, or significant social type. Skewed groups are those in which there is a larger proportion of one type over another, up to a ratio of 85:15, and Kanter suggests the problems tokens face will diminish as their numbers increase from 15%. If men now constitute more than 15% of the population, then according to the theory of tokenism, they should not experience workplace stereotyping and polarization through their visibility and assimilation into a profession typically viewed as feminine.

Method

This study was comprised of a mixed methods approach. A purposeful sample was taken for interview participants enrolled at one university in the Midwest, one campus in the Eastern United States (U.S.), and one campus in the Western U.S. (Participants from other programs also responded from the unplanned distribution of the survey by interested individuals who discovered the survey on their own.) Data was collected from 231 survey participants enrolled in 37 library and information science graduate programs across the U.S. and data in annual Association of Library and Information Science Education Statistical Reports. These programs included traditional library science and new information science programs (including iSchools).

Population

Participants include males of all races born after 1981 and currently enrolled in a graduate library and information science (LIS) degree program in institutions of higher education in the U.S. The number of men enrolled in ALA-accredited LIS programs reflects the current ratio of men in the profession, where, of all full and part-time enrolled students, men were 20.5% (3,822 students), compared to the 79.5% female population (14,835 students) (Wallace, 2012).

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey instrument was accessible through the online survey software *Qualtrics* and addressed a variety of topics focusing on gender, technology, library stereotypes, and personal characteristics (age, sex) used for classification purposes. Closed questions in the survey were selected for a variety of reasons beneficial to both the participants and researcher and short-answer questions were provided at the end of the survey.

Twenty-one structured interviews were conducted using an interview protocol, providing opportunities for participants to share their experiences, such as reasons for joining the library profession, personal technology use, and encounters with librarian stereotypes as well as reconstructing events leading up to the decision to attend library school. All interview questions were open-ended, providing in-depth discussion of the topic as the interviewee shared details he found relevant to the questions, with an opportunity for the participant to share additional thoughts at the end of the interview. Interviews were recorded using *Adobe Connect Pro* and *Microsoft Word* and *Microsoft Excel* programs were used to organize, analyze, and visualize content from the interviews and surveys.

Research Problem

The problem that led to this study is that library science has not identified the factors that currently influence Millennial males to join the library profession. Motivational factors for members of the male library workforce remain obscure for the profession without insight into the dynamics of sex, gender roles, and technology in the workplace. Professional stereotypes may be misinterpreted 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 female profession face different levels of prejudice than do women (Williams, 1991). Exploring why men choose to become librarians by enrolling in graduate programs may help employers formulate more precise recruitment techniques so they may better represent the populations they serve.

Finding

Kanter's Theory of Tokenism

Men as the Kanterian solo: The presence of solos makes dominants more aware of what they have in common whether in a LIS graduate program or in the workplace.

Male tokens represent their ascribed category: Despite their numbers, men are still being negatively stereotyped both in the workplace and in public perceptions.

Kanter's concept of visibility: Gender was a distinct factor in the decision to delegate a task to a male or female library employee.

Kanter's concept of polarization: Male librarians must either ignore or work especially hard to fight stereotypes because they are unable to disprove the stereotypes by example.

Kanter's theory of assimilation: Assimilation occurs through stereotypes because the majority group shapes the characteristics of the male librarian to fit the generalization.

Professional Stereotypes

Librarianship as a feminized profession: Narrative responses (n = 68) discussing 79 respondents' perceptions of male professional librarians in general indicated respondents focused on men as a highly visible minority group in librarianship (26, 38%), followed closely by feminine stereotypes associated with librarianship (16, 24%). In total, 75 individual responses (combined from the open-ended survey questions and the 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.

Male librarians are know-it-alls: When men do become librarians, the public negotiates perceptions to "fit" the male into the library in some role that is "masculine." This study 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. In both instances, the male librarian is negatively stereotyped as a *know-it-all*, or the person who can always help because he knows everything about everything in the library.

Factors Influencing Men to Join the Library Profession

Love of books, learning, and intellectual stimulation was the strongest draw to librarianship for survey participants to the profession in the survey (n = 220), with 85% responding "Strongly Agree" or "Agree." Social factors widely appear to have the strongest influence on male Millennials to come to library school and become professional librarians, much more so than cultural, economic, and/or political factors. Surprisingly, gaming appears to be of least interest as a factor for recruiting more men to the profession and had the weakest survey responses. Participants did not mention it at all in the interviews as a reason for wanting to become a librarian. Only 15% of iSchool participants (11/72) "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" that gaming in libraries was a factor in the decision to become a professional librarian, compared to 21% of traditional program participants (31/148).

#	Topic	Strongly Agree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Disagree 5	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Love of books	99	89	17	12	3	1.78	0.91
2	Work experience	74	59	38	29	20	2.37	1.31
3	Non-threatening work environments	25	60	70	52	13	2.85	1.09
4	Social improvements	65	81	34	30	10	2.27	1.16
5	Library management	65	72	48	24	11	2.29	1.15
6	Computer technologies	31	67	62	45	15	2.75	1.14
7	Financial means	49	96	31	34	10	2.36	1.12
8	Public work	37	83	51	37	12	2.56	1.12
9	Gaming	15	27	42	79	57	3.62	1.19

Computer Technologies as a Factor

Male Millennials were influenced by the desire to use computers and new computer technology as a factor for enrolling in LIS programs. The largest group of responses in both the survey (20/84) and interviews (7/21) supports the idea technology plays a role for attracting men in general to the profession overall. The desire to use computers and new computer technology was identified by men as a reason for becoming a professional librarian. Seventy-six percent of respondents (113/148) from traditional programs "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" that computer technology was a factor in the decision to become a professional librarian, compared to 44% of iSchool participants who "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" (32/72).

Research Question

How does Kanter's theory of tokenism apply to the presence of male Millennials currently enrolled in library science graduate programs?

Subquestions:

1. What social, cultural, economic, and/or political factors influence Millennial males currently enrolled in graduate programs to become professional librarians?
2. To what extent has technology influenced Millennial males currently enrolled in graduate programs decisions to become professional librarians?
3. What professional stereotypes do Millennial males currently enrolled in graduate programs encounter?

Can the term "guybrarian" just go die in a fiery pit?

~Survey Participant

Conclusions and Future Directions

Conclusions

I began this study wanting to know if there is a relationship between technology, gender, and male Millennials in librarianship. The conclusions of the study are:

- Many positive social factors strongly influence male Millennials to attend LIS programs to become professional librarians despite society simultaneously negatively stereotyping the profession as feminized and a career for know-it-alls.
- Students perceive the benefits of becoming a librarian outweigh the aspects of polarization and visibility.
- Negative male librarian stereotypes are no longer strong enough to keep men from becoming professional librarians.
- Kanter's use of a mathematical equation to equalize employee numbers does not solve the problems tokens face in the workplace.

Future Directions

Based on the results of this study, there are opportunities to build on the literature with comparative studies between:

- Different generations of men enrolled in MLS programs
- Participants choosing iSchools versus traditional programs
- Participants choosing distance versus residential programs
- Results of the current study versus Millennials enrolled in MLS programs in ten years

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