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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 Millennial men’s decisions to enroll in library and information science graduate programs. The central framework investigates how tokenism relates to the presence of Millennials currently enrolled in library and information science graduate programs with the goal to become professional librarians.

Theory

Kanter’s (1976b) 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 (1976b) asserts every group and work setting has a group of dominants composed of people who share similar characteristics. The opposite group, tokenists, signifies people who cannot be categorized with the dominant group, and are “treated as representatives of their category, as symbols rather than individuals” (Kanter, 1976b, p. 965). 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 tokenist serves as a representative of that sex within the library profession (Kanter, 1976b). Kanter’s theory (1976b) 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. Swelled 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 unanticipated distribution of the survey by interested individuals who discovered the survey on their own.) Data was collected from 231 enrolled students enrolled in 37 library and information science graduate programs across the U.S. and data in annual Association of Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) Reports. These programs included traditional library science and new information science programs (including iSchools).

Population

Participants include makes of all ages born after 1981 and currently enrolled in a graduate library and information science (LIS) 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, whereas, all full and part-time enrolled students, men were 20.5% (3,622 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 encountering with librarian stereotypes as well as reconstructing events leading up to the decision to attend a LIS graduate program. All interview questions were open-ended, providing in-depth discussion of the topic as the interviewees shared stories. The interviewees shared stories, with an opportunity for the participants to share additional thoughts at the end of the interview. Interviews were recorded using Adobe Connect Pro and Microsoft Word/Microsoft Excel tools 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. Furthermore, current literature about male librarianship remains obscure for the profession without insight into the dynamics of sex, gender roles, and technology in the workplace. This study examines two preconceptions associated with the male librarian in the library workplace as women. Social roles and rules are different for men and women in librarianship, and men and women holding a female profession are always at risk 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.

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?

Findings

Kanter’s Theory of Tokenism

Men as the Kanterian solo: The presence of soloism marks the new awareness of what they havecreated in common whether in his 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 theory of invisibility: Center was a distinct factor in the decision to delegate a task to a male or female employee library.

Kanter’s concept of polarization: Male librarians must either ignore or work especially hard to fight stereotypes because they are unable to disguise 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 = 66) discussing 79 respondents’ perceptions of male professional librarians in general indicated respondents focused on men as 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. Instincts 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 individual into the library profession rather than a stereotype. 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 they know everything about anything in the library.

Factors Influencing Men to Join the Library Profession

Librarianship as a feminized profession was the strongest draw to librarianship for survey participants to the profession (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, or political factors. Surprisingly, gaming appears to be of least interest to men to the profession and had the weakest survey responses. Participants did not mention it at all in the interviews as a reason wanting to become librarians. Only 15% of respondents (n = 172) “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that gaming in librarians is a factor in the decision to become a professional librarian, compared to 21% of traditional program participants (n = 148).

Research Question

Can the term “guybrarian” just go die in a fiery pit? -Survey Participant

Conclusions

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

• 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 year increments

Future Directions

Future directions to follow include:

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

• 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 year increments

Selected References


