Factors Influencing Male Millennials to Become Professional Librarians

Heidi Blackburn
University of Nebraska at Omaha, hblackburn@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/crisslibfacproc
Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/crisslibfacproc/112
Factors Influencing Male Millennials to Become Professional Librarians

Heidi Blackburn, hblackbu@geamporda.edu
Emporia State University School of Library & Information Management, Emporia, KS

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 to enroll in library and information science graduate programs. The central framework investigates how Kanter’s theory of tokenism forms the basis of this study by applying it to a workplace situation, men in the library workplace as women. Social roles and rules 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.

Theory

Kanter’s (1976b) theory of tokenism forms the basis of this study by applying it to a workplace situation, men in the library workplace as women. Social roles and rules are different for men and women and men joining a traditionally female profession face different levels of prejudice than do women (Williams, 1991). Kanter’s theory of tokenism identifies 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 unlimited distribution of the survey by interested individuals who discovered the survey on their own.) Data was collected from 231 iSchool participants who “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” (32/72). Of these respondents, 173 men were recruited, of which 145 chose to participate and 76 agreed to be interviewed. Sixty-five interviews were conducted by researchers and 42 by iSchool students. A total of 127 male participants were enrolled in 37 library and information science graduate programs across the U.S. and data is in annual Association of Library and Information Science Education (ALSIE) Reports. These programs included traditional library science and new information science programs (including iSchools).

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 enroll in the library school. All interview questions were open-ended, providing in-depth discussion of the topic as the interviewees shared details he found relevant to the questions, with an opportunity for the participant to share any additional thoughts at the end of the interview. Interviews were recorded using Adobe Connect Pro and Microsoft Word and Excel results 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. Male librarian data shows that 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 workplace as women. Social roles and rules 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.

Findings

Kanter’s Theory of Tokenism

Men as the Kantorian token: The presence of tokens makes dominants more aware of what they have in common whether in a LIS 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 perception. Male tokens are seen as outsiders in the workplace. Kanter’s theory of assimilation: Male tokens assimilate and become less visible as they become a part of the majority group. Male tokens face in the workplace.

Professional Stereotypes

Librarian as a feminized profession: Narrative responses (n = 68) discussing 79 respondents’ perceptions of male professional librarians in general indicated respondents focused on men as highly visible minority group in librarianship (26, 33%), followed closely by femininity 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 negates perceptions to “fit” the mold that is often expected of librarians. 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 an expert 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 anything in the library.

Factors Influencing Men to Join the Library Profession

Like knowledge, learning, and intellectual stimulation was the strongest draw to library profession for 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 choose a career for know-it-alls. The desire to become professional librarians, much more so than cultural, economic, and/or political factors. Surprisingly, it was surprising to find that computer technology was a factor in the decision to become a professional librarian, compared to 21% of traditional male librarians responding “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 to become professional librarians?

3. What professional stereotypes do Millennial males currently enrolled in graduate programs encounter?

Conclusions and Future Directions

Conclusions

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

• Many positive social factors strongly influence male Millennials to attend LIS programs to become professional librarians despite societal 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.

• Need for more male librarians are no longer strong enough to keep men from becoming professional librarians.

• A lack 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

Selected References


