

Winifred Fordham. Exploring the Image of the Librarian through Themes of Identity and Self. A Master's paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. November, 2000. 34 pages.
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This paper will explore themes of identity and self as a means of creating a unified identity or multiple information identities for librarians. This paper is being written in response to historical and current literature surrounding the image of the librarian, particularly negative stereotypes.

By examining library literature and themes of image, identity, and self, librarians will begin to create identities that will allow them to be recognized by the public as information specialists, educators, and authoritative guides to paths of inquiry. Where yesterday's image of librarians came to be silent stereotypes and shadowy misconceptions, today's librarians are dissatisfied voices too caught up in the language of dissatisfaction to go beyond this stereotype. Tomorrow's librarians must be free to move ahead into roles they have defined for themselves. Exploring principles of the learning process by Jerome Bruner, Lev Vygotsky, and Frank Smith will enable librarians to identify and address patron learning needs in more active ways. By becoming more mindful of the desire for a coherent narrative, as well as by allowing for individual cognitive styles, the librarian will enrich and heighten the patron's learning experience.

Headings:

Librarians – Public Opinion

Stereotype

Libraries – Public Image

Librarians - Stereotype

Table of Contents

“But You Don’t Look Like a Librarian”	1
Defining the Problem	4
Explaining the Relevance	8
Notes from the Field	10
Before Looking to Others We Must Look to Ourselves	14
Reference Desk Dyads	20
Identity Leads to Paths of Understanding and Learning	25
Revisiting Earlier Questions	26
Possible Paths for Future Inquiry	28
References	32

...Nothing more can be attempted than to establish the beginning and the direction of an infinitely long road. The pretension of any systematic and definitive completeness would be, at least, a self-illusion. Perfection can here be obtained by the individual student only in the subjective sense that he communicates everything he has been able to see.

--Georg Simmel

“But you don’t look like a librarian.”

When I tell people that I am studying to be a librarian, their responses amaze me. More often than not, comments expressing their incredulity ring in my ears. I am left to defend my choice as they mutter things like “but you’re so creative,” “couldn’t you find something more challenging,” and my personal favorite, “but you don’t look like a librarian.” Attempting to define this phenomenon, I question those who are quick to protest my choice of graduate programs. “What makes you say that?” “Why do you think I would not be challenged by library work?” “Don’t you think librarians are creative?” I discover that even my friends find it difficult to be honest and direct when addressing this subject. They hem around the issues of stereotype, and avoid altogether any explanation of their negative impressions. One friend admits surprise that the study of library science is a graduate level curriculum.

While I do not pretend to be naïve of the stereotypes that surround the library profession, the regularity and lack of originality of these responses began to take their toll. I looked to the profession for answers and found the literature of librarianship

brimming with articles pertaining to the image of the librarian. Commentaries on established, often negative, stereotypes and studies of how librarians view themselves and others in the field appear in numerous library journals. *American Libraries* has a running column entitled “Image”, where readers submit examples of librarian stereotypes. The American Library Association has also repeatedly attempted to address this issue with a national campaign, as well as a series of conferences.

As early as 1968, Dale Shaffer produced a book dealing with issues of image surrounding the librarian. *Librarianship as a Profession* was presented as a practical means of outlining the characteristics, criteria and responsibilities of a profession. Shaffer then evaluates librarianship in terms of these professional characteristics, in hope of formulating some recommendations to the profession. He spends considerable time on the issue of image in both of these sections. Shaffer states that “If the public cannot fill out a meaningful picture on the basis of fact and reality, then it will use fantasy” (Shaffer, 1968, p.121). Offering lists of these products of fantasy, or stereotypes, Shaffer then asserts that “the influence of an incorrect image is so powerful that it cannot be overlooked, or allowed to take care of itself” (Shaffer, p.121). Nearly fifteen years later, Pauline Wilson produced a book also concerned with issues of stereotype in image in the library profession. Like Shaffer, Wilson offered assistance to librarians. She intended “to help librarians in deciding upon and implementing actions necessary to help overcome the unfavorable stereotype that has plagued the library profession throughout this century” (Wilson, 1982, ix). While some of her recommendations have been considered extreme (imposing a moratorium upon the discussion of stereotypes within professional literature, as well as removing some librarians from the public sector based

solely on age), her definition of stereotype is useful. Wilson suggests that a stereotype is “a product of social learning acquired from the media and human interaction” (Wilson, p.9). Here it seems that she suggests both librarians and the media are to blame for the existing stereotypes.

Much attention has been given to the image of the librarian as perceived by librarians themselves, while little effort has been made to address the situation or offer alternatives to the problems of stereotype and negative image in recent years. Beyond these tomes written by Dale Shaffer and Pauline Wilson, as well as a shelf full of similarly dated books, literature attempting to define a unified identity for librarians and making recommendations on how to attain and/or maintain this identity has gone by the wayside. Currently, opinion articles and literature responding to these negative librarian stereotypes help populate the literature of the field.

What follows is an exploratory essay, concerned with the image of the librarian and how this image impacts both the success of the profession and in turn, the success of the library. It has been established that librarians suffer an image problem; it will be useful to explore this problem from within and outside of the profession. How do librarians’ perceptions of themselves impact their role as professionals? Do these negative stereotypes (self-perpetuated and otherwise) undermine their effectiveness as information specialists, educators, and guides to patron’s paths of inquiry? What is the impact of this problem on the library? How does it affect the transaction of information on a whole?

I address these questions and others by examining principles surrounding issues of self, identity and learning. This examination recognizes the need for librarians to

create their own identities rather than simply relying upon and reacting to existing shadow images and stereotypes. Librarians will need to be more creative and aggressive in apportioning these identities, if the patron is to successfully recognize them as more than conduits to books, but as information specialists ready to assist their information needs, and as an educator, an authoritative guide to their paths of inquiry.

While this essay responds to historical and current library literature surrounding the image problem of librarians, I do not suggest that every member of the library field either embraces or contributes to the endorsement or perpetuation of this image problem and/or stereotype. Rather, this exploration into the problem and the associations and findings are addressed to the groups of librarians concerned (and often consumed) with this subject.

Defining the problem

So, yes, librarians suffer an image problem. They discuss it at their organizational conferences; ALA (American Library Association), SLA (Special Libraries Association) and IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) have incorporated many presentations on image at their conferences and workshops. Librarians also design programs around the issue of image; American Library Association 1988 National Library Week, IFLA Round Table for the Management of Library Associations, and SLA Inter-Association Task Force. They also scribe numerous opinion articles and produce scholarly works that have appeared in various professional journals, magazines, and organizational publications over the last two decades. Conducting keyword searches for

“image” and “stereotype” with regard to the library profession will result in an abundance of results on databases such as Library Literature, Academic Search Elite, and InfoTrac.

Why does the profession seem so preoccupied with this issue of image? On a personal or professional scale, is this just an issue of ego? Or, are librarians simply being too “sensitive” to professional stereotype, something Linda Wallace (former director of the American Library Association’s Public Information Office) suggests in her article concerning the image in *American Libraries* (Wallace, 1989, p.22). Wallace offers “I really don’t know whether librarians are more sensitive than other professionals, but sometimes it seems that way to us in the ALA Public Information Office – probably because we’re the ones that get the letters and phone calls wanting ALA to ‘do something’” (Wallace, p. 22). Perhaps a combination of sensitivity and a measure of ego factor into this problem of image. The problem might be further refined by suggesting that at the heart of it lies librarians’ need for self-esteem and approbation from the public, something Georg Simmel addresses repeatedly with his theory on the development of the individual within society. He offers that for many, “ultimately the only means of saving for themselves some modicum of self-esteem and the sense of filling a position” results strictly from obtaining “the awareness of others” (Farganis, 1993, p.143). Simmel also stresses the need of the individual self to find “an unambiguous image of himself in the eyes of others” (Farganis, p.143). In *The Evolving Self*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi presents similar observations, stating that “human relationships seem a much sounder basis for building an image of the self” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p.80). Later, he concedes that “unfortunately the temptation to use other people to aggrandize one’s ego is also quite strong, and many people find it difficult to resist” (Csikszentmihalyi, p.80).

Of course, a certain amount of recognition from others is needed, providing a process that helps to establish and refine roles as well as gauge performance. Negotiations of this sort are tantamount to any professional experience from both the professional librarian's and patron's points of view. In this instance, however "the awareness of others" has grown into something more, occupying the professional literature as a discourse surrounding these issues of image, negative stereotype and identity.

Currently, it seems that the efforts and focus of the profession with regard to image have been placed on *solely reacting* to negative stereotypes. One such example is Linda Wallace's article, "The Image – and what you can do about it in the Year of the Librarian." Another example can be found in Joyce Valenza's article "Just a Librarian? Who do they think we are?" Here, Valenza argues against negative stereotypes found everywhere from a "dowdy" clothing line offered by Calvin Klein, to the somewhat famous Saturn commercial, to movies like the *Music Man* and *The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag* (Valenza, 1996, p.16-17). The call and response existing in contemporary library literature *is often conducted with itself*. Many of the articles are self-referential and not in response to pressing attacks from outside the field of librarianship. Wallace's article discusses an incident at an ALA conference where one librarian was quoted as saying "that most of her colleagues wear sensible shoes and aren't very fashionable" (Wallace, 1989, p. 22). This comment upset a lot of librarians spawned numerous responses in the form of both verbal and written dialogue in the profession.

The lack of a unifying identity or possible identities that accurately establish the roles and positions of librarians within the library, and further, the field of information

exchange at large, is the source of librarians' image problem. As Diane Richards and Paula Elliot explain in their paper "How Others See Us," librarians need to agree on the image or persona they want to project and work together to bring it to fruition (Richards & Elliot, 1988). In discussing a program entitled "How Others See Us: The Professional Image of the Librarian," Richards and Elliot quote three featured speakers who made parallel statements in their presentations. Each essentially suggested that a clear, common identity must first be decided upon, with librarians then pursuing that ideal in a systematic and cohesive manner.

Further, Kafka helps set the tone I want to attain in this essay and speaks to two salient issues surrounding this problem of image.

There exists in the same human being varying perceptions of one and the same object which differ so completely from each other that one can only deduce the existence of different subjects in the same human being.

--Franz Kafka, The Great Wall of China

Here, Kafka's words lend themselves to the duality or multi-faceted aspect of librarians', both real and perceived images and roles within the information community and public at large. The metaphor suggests librarians have both real selves and perceived selves to contend with as they strive to construct professional identities. The process of defining a unifying identity or creating several possible identities for librarians will not only affect the image of the librarian within the field but by the public as well. This, in turn, will impact the effectiveness of the library and its future success, making this problem an extremely relevant one.

Explaining the Relevance

Although there has been some literature produced regarding librarians' own perceptions of themselves as professionals, there seems to be no empirical data reporting how the general public perceives them beyond the pat negative stereotype and superficial images offered by the media. More important, there is a lack of data establishing that the public readily identifies what a librarian's field of expertise is. Obviously there is a pressing need for exploring this subject further in that the image of the librarian speaks directly to the image of the library. However, I suggest that, before conducting further research, energy would be more wisely spent taking action with regard to this issue of image. Librarians need to establish to the public what their field of expertise is. The librarian is the personification of the library, and their image in turn directly impacts the success of the library particularly in regard to public services.

Admittedly, my first instinct lead me to think that librarians need to change their current public image (and the negative stereotypes that surround them) in order for the public to recognize them as professionals in the field of library science, and more importantly in the current field of information exchange. The literature now leads me to see that what really needs to occur is a serious measure of introspection. Before being able to fix the problem, there must be an understanding of *how* or *why* the problem came to be. In doing this, librarians need to ask themselves what makes this issue of image so important to them. Patricia Glass Schuman certainly agrees. In her article "The Image of Librarians: Substance or Shadow," she asks, "Why, then, is the library profession so particularly caught up with the question of image?" (Schuman, 1990, p.86)

At some point in this process of introspection, librarians need to accept the onus for public stereotypes and other perceived images. It is not sufficient to simply *react* to a stereotype or image created by media and literature, and often perpetuated by the members of the profession itself, but to take the initiative to invent themselves in the eyes of the public. Schuman writes, “Our forces should not be on how attractive people think we are (or even how smart) but how useful, necessary, and important we are to their education, research, and everyday lives and work.” (Schuman, 1990, p.87) This is of particular importance now, in light of the dynamic influence of technology on the current atmosphere in the field of information science. “The increasing value,” asserts Schuman, “placed on information offers an unparalleled opportunity to present the case for librarians and librarianship.” (Schuman, p.86) Although this statement was made ten years ago, it is still quite appropriate. In fact, given the current and ever advancing state of technology, it is even more significant today. I do not think that the term “re-invent” would apply here, in that this would imply that a *real* identity, beyond the shallow stereotype or shadowy images currently discussed in library literature, already exists or is recognizable. I think the issue for the future of the profession and the library itself, is to create these identities and lay the groundwork for other possible identities so the focus can return to the task of establishing what the library is now and is in the process of becoming.

Notes From the Field

In response to the organizational conferences, programs, and numerous articles opining the image problem of librarians, some groups have banded together expressly to conduct research and make recommendations. The IFLA Roundtable for the Management of Library Associations published a report in 1995, *The Image of the Library and Information Profession – How we see ourselves: An Investigation*. Understanding that “the problems of image ... have been of concern to the library and information services profession for years, if not decades,” the IFLA instructed a group to address these concerns and formulate a report (Prins, 1995, p.5). In 1988, the Special Libraries Association created the Inter-Association Task Force to gather and evaluate data on the Image of the Librarian/Information Professional (SLA, 1991). Their stated primary objective was “to determine exactly how society perceives librarians in order to prepare and implement a plan of action to change or enhance the image should the results indicate that it was necessary” (SLA, p.135). Like others before them, the task force selected many of its participants mainly from within the fields of librarianship and academia. They did manage to report a *society’s* views section along with their *librarian’s* views results. Not surprisingly, however, their list of ten recommendations to the profession were broad ranging and vague; “project corporate image by excellent image, manage the library to meet corporate goals, maintain high standards with subordinates.” (SLA, p.137) They also recommended lobbying for a “special day or week.”

Where there is a noticeable dearth of empirical data concerning the general public’s perception of librarian’s roles within the profession, library literature is replete

with opinion articles and scholarly works addressing the image of librarians. Locke J. Morrissey and Donald O. Case (1988) as well as James Charmichael (1992) address issues of stereotype and image of the male librarian in academic papers. Yvonne Duke, in a master's thesis, discusses issues of image and stereotype in a manner reflective of the current time; the image of the librarian as presented on the World Wide Web (1999). Several librarians in the past decade have written articles discussing various aspects of this subject. Patricia Glass Schuman in 1990, Joyce Valenza in 1996, Marie Radford in 1997, and most recently, John Cullen and Dan Hutchins in 2000, equally deride the media for their part in perpetuating ugly, austere stereotypes of librarians. Each article cites numerous examples of these negative stereotypes as well as offering many of the adverse effects this type of broadcast has on the success of the profession. Of which Cullen surmises, "We have much to offer the world but we don't often get the opportunity because of the negative impressions soaked up by the people who would most benefit from our expertise" (Cullen, 2000, p.42). Instead of solely placing the onus elsewhere, Schuman, Valenza, and Hutchins announce that it is ultimately the responsibility of the librarian to dispel these negative images and educate the public. They are on the right track. By accepting responsibility for their image, librarians are taking the first steps needed to begin the process of creating their own identities.

Why has so much collective professional energy been spent addressing this issue of image? Some might argue that these librarians are merely reacting to an existing dynamic, trying to defend themselves from the negative stereotypes and public misconceptions of their profession. Csikszentmihalyi offers that "our view of the world becomes polarized into 'good' and 'bad'; to the first belongs those things that support the

image of the self, to the second those that threaten it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p.74).

Librarians will need to do more than defend themselves, after the fact, from these stereotypes that threaten their image. They need to take an active stance in protecting themselves by creating for themselves and supporting amongst themselves their own, more appropriate and professionally responsible identities.

Why should librarians be concerned with image? A professional negative image impacts librarian salaries, their status, and how people respond to them. Issues of image can also affect the profession’s recruitment, morale, and job satisfaction (which can in turn affect retention of professionals as well as public service performance / patron services). It can also influence a patron’s learning experience. And, on a larger scale, it affects the success of the library with regard to use, funding, and growth. Understanding why librarians should be concerned about their image is a valid and essential part of creating and maintaining viable and acceptable identities for themselves. What I am concerned with in regard to the professional literature, is why this continues to be discussed without hint of a communal resolution. So, again I am left asking the question, *Why are librarians focusing on how the public views them?*

From what Simmel and Csikszentmihalyi say, it is natural to seek approbation from others; but to *what extent* seems to remain the problem for librarians. *How does the profession continue and/or aid in the continuation of these misconceptions and shallow images?* Perhaps it is by contributing to the stereotype. This might occur when librarians make the assumption that library users know more than they do. Bewildering technologies, burgeoning reference tools, and sources difficult to use like government

documents often augment this occurrence. Another way librarians contribute to the stereotype is by failing to understand the dynamics of their communities.

This lack of communication, or an open dialogue, affects both sides of the reference desk: librarians not understanding their communities and their communities not understanding them. Perhaps the most impactful way that librarians contribute to the stereotype is by not presenting an inviting, collaborative, accessible situation for learning. In a profession where public service is key, librarians' response to patron's inquiries and pervasive attitude are very significant. Speaking to this, Dan Hutchins asserts that librarians should be made ready for this interaction and "graduate schools must expand their admissions criteria to include social skills, personality, and a love of people" (Hutchins, 2000, p.57). I will go one further, suggesting that graduate schools make teaching these skills *a mandatory part of the curriculum*.

Dr. Cosette Kies offers another solution for improving the professional image of librarians: through marketing. Working with the example of past successes marketing the library, Kies suggests that the same effort be extended to the people who work in the library as well. If image is how the outside world perceives librarians and identity is the way librarians see themselves, then perhaps marketing can bring these perceptions into a more communal focus. One aspect of marketing would be to dispel the shroud of mystery surrounding the librarian. Schuman asserts that "Few people outside the library profession understand who librarians are – or what librarians do" (Schuman, 1990, p.86). This could be attributed to the fact that a considerable amount of what librarians do is conducted well behind the public specter of the reference and check-out desks.

Cataloging, collection development, archiving and preservation, as well as fundraising and management duties are not readily apparent to the average patron.

While a major proponent of direct marketing, Dr. Kies extends an alternative by recommending librarians look to other professions who have suffered equal image problems for advice. In her article “Marketing the Librarian: The Weakest Link in the Chain,” Dr. Kies explores both the legal and medical professions for some answers (Kies, 1991). Admittedly, doctors and attorneys have suffered media backlash and public stereotype equal to librarians, as both medical and legal professional literature attests. But the doctor and attorney hold an advantage over the librarian in that their patients and clients afford them a certain amount of implied trust at the offset. The public openly recognizes that doctors and attorneys are heavily schooled and highly skilled. Their areas of expertise are automatically identified and linked to their professions: doctors *of* medicine and attorneys *at* law. This attitude is expressed repeatedly in national surveys and public opinion polls conducted by professional organizations in both the medical and legal field.

Before looking to others we must look to ourselves

While learning from other professional’s experiences with image might certainly help librarians with their own struggle, it would be wise to start the process by looking within the profession for answers. An exploration of the self as a means of creating identity (unified or otherwise) is needed here. Borrowing from Jacques Lacan’s theory of

‘subject’ and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Georg Simmel, and Erving Goffman’s teachings on image, identity, and self will help begin this process of introspective discovery.

Both, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a scholar and author in the field of psychology and Georg Simmel, noted founding figure of micro-sociology, have devoted considerable time to the exploration of themes of identity, individual and self. As presented earlier, they each have offered commentary on the influence of others on one’s image of self. I think it is essential that we as librarians and information workers understand “who we are and where we are among our tasks and expectations” (Carr, 1997). With this essay, I have set myself the task of exploring why this issue of image is of such significance to a vast majority of members of the library profession. I expect to make some useful discoveries and recommendations on how these librarians might transcend this dilemma.

Here, I think an examination and application of Jacques Lacan’s theory of “subject” will prove useful in answering or, at the least, placing “who” and “where” librarians are in the context of this image problem. In Lacan’s “imaginary” phase, the “imaginary-self” is:

... A state in which there is no clear distinction between subject and object: no central self exists to set object apart from subject. In the pre-linguistic ‘mirror-phase’ the child, from within this ‘imaginary’ state of being starts to project a certain unity into the fragmented self-image in the mirror (there does not have to be an actual mirror); he or she produces a ‘fictional’ ideal, an ‘ego’. This...image is still partly imaginary, ...but also partly differentiated as ‘another’ (Seldon, 1985, p.81-2).

In the library dynamic, the reference desk has come to represent a symbolic “mirror”, framing both librarian and patron. The interplay between them offers, to a degree, a juxtaposition of object and subject. Here, as the current library literature suggests, the

librarian is looking to find a sense of self as well as approbation within this interaction between themselves and their community of users.

For the librarian, there may be some substitution of the public's response and/or media stereotype for the "ego" as defined by Lacan. He also offers that "the imaginary relationship with the other occurs in a dual situation which is primarily narcissistic...and identification with the image of the other predominate at this stage" (Penley, 1988, p.25). In this situation, the "image of the other" refers to the identity or stereotype of how the public or patron perceives the librarian. Librarians do not necessarily see themselves in the patron's reflection but allow the patron's vision of the librarian to define them. That is, librarians may identify themselves by how they think the patron sees them. The vision or voice of the patron has come to be represented by the media in various stereotypes and negative images. Wilson acknowledges this in her discussion on librarians seeing themselves in the eyes of the public and defining themselves by the characteristics assigned to them by the public. She continues, saying "Whether the alleged characteristics actually are true does not matter because when one sees one's group through the eyes of the others – through the eyes of the stereotype – those characteristics become true for the individual" (Wilson, 1982, p.36). Though the course of seeking the "other's" endorsement, the librarian silently accepts the stereotype as part of the process. This in turn, implies that members of the library profession have helped and are helping to perpetuate negative stereotypes by doing nothing to prevent or dispel this persona.

The next phase in Lacan's theory of the subject is the "symbolic" phase. He explains that the "symbolic" phase represents the awakening of a sense of identity. Here again, this phase closely resembles the issue of image as it is presented in current library

literature. Librarians in the “symbolic” phase may be in constant struggle with these negative stereotypes and issues of image. Here lies the heart of the problem for librarians. In the “imaginary” phase, yesterday’s librarians seemed to have silently taken on the persona given them by the reference desk interaction, being little more than how the patron identified them. During the “symbolic” phase, today’s librarians are taking exception to these identities put upon them that have now become stereotypes and are foreign to how they wish to be recognized. In doing nothing more than voicing their opinions in response to these stereotypes, today’s librarians will remain suspended in the “symbolic” until they go beyond merely *re-acting* vocally.

Tomorrow’s librarians need to take *action* to transcend the “symbolic.” According to Lacan, “neither the ‘imaginary’ nor the ‘symbolic’ can fully comprehend the ‘real’, which remains out there somewhere beyond their reach” (Seldon, 1985, p.82). Unlike the “imaginary” and the “symbolic”, the “real” is active in creating its own identity. In the “real” you have the opportunity to define yourself and state your intentions and desires. Here, tomorrow’s librarians can attain the “real” by finding a collective voice, and acting as narrator of their profession. They must explore and present facets of themselves beyond those that have already been portrayed. And, they must physically actualize the “real” by defining and apportioning self-created identities, while paving the way for more. Where yesterday’s image of librarians came to be silent stereotypes and shadowy misconceptions, today’s librarians are dissatisfied voices too caught up in the language of dissatisfaction to go beyond this stereotype. Tomorrow’s librarians must be free to move ahead into roles they have defined for themselves as information specialists, educators and authoritative guides.

Realizing this goal will be difficult. It is one thing to suggest that librarians need not concern themselves with how the public views them (as a means of providing identity), it is another to get them to accept it or put it into practice. As Simmel and Csikszentmihalyi have suggested, it is human nature to seek one's identity, in part, in the vision or reflection of others. Erving Goffman shares this point of view in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, suggesting that we are performers constantly gauging the reaction of our audience in an attempt to invoke a desired response from the 'other'. And, when this reaction comes in the highly publicized voice of the media, it is harder still to ignore. Rather than address media-driven stereotypes, public misconceptions and in-profession bickering over status, librarian's collective energies might better be spent on creating responsible and productive identities within the library profession. If stereotypes demand attention, Csikszentmihalyi offers that, "it is liberating to question the descriptions of the reality of one's culture, especially those presented by the media" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p.75). He concludes that, "as long as we realize that the media presents the world *sub specie culturae* (under the aspect of culture), we are less likely to be deceived" (Csikszentmihalyi, p.75). Librarians cannot rely on this, however, they have to go further in that they need to create and solidify collective professional identities within the field for themselves, with each other, and to potential learners/patrons.

Csikszentmihalyi asserts that "images are unable to present a 'true' picture of reality" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p.220). In the event that these stereotypes remain unavoidable, Csikszentmihalyi provides that "such distortions of reality are of course entirely functional, in that they potentially serve the purpose of propelling the individual

toward more desirable states of being” (Csikszentmihalyi, p.221). The profession can learn from this. Librarians can use these stereotypes as impetus to take action, rather than purely something upon which to re-act. In lieu of recounting examples of these stereotypes and hackneyed images, librarians should populate their articles with more appropriate or realistic examples of librarians: “information specialists, storytellers, technology coordinators, Internet gurus, teachers, trainers, fundraisers, system designers, bibliotherapists, consultants, [and] nurturers” (Valenza, 1996, p.17). Describe these identities or give examples of them in action instead of wasting valuable energy dissecting each offensive element of librarian stereotypes. An essay decrying buns, comfortable shoes and litany of “shhh’s” is nothing new or innovative, and it offers no value to the profession. Or, as Schuman puts it, “This means spending less time talking to ourselves, about ourselves” (Schuman, 1990, p. 88).

As librarians move toward action, or the process of identifying themselves as information specialists, educators and authoritative guides, they must be mindful of how they portray themselves and enact these identities. The success of establishing these identities for themselves and to the public depends upon their individual performances.

Here, Goffman’s words ring out as a warning when he asserts that, “audiences tend to accept the self projected by the individual performer during any current performance as a responsible representative of his colleague grouping [and] of his team” (Goffman, 1959, p.242). This can work to both librarians’ advantage and disadvantage, depending upon how the public perceives the interaction. They must create these identities and practice them with a sense of authority and precision in the hope of achieving a unified identity along the lines of educator, information specialist and

authoritative guide. As Schuman asserts, “the salient issue is how self-confident we are about who we are and what we do” (Schuman, 1990, p.88). The patron’s or learner’s experiences with us will work to enforce and eventually reinforce these images to others. If these experiences are successful and productive, word of mouth testimonials will help to establish and solidify these images in the public mind.

Revisiting the example of the reference desk as a “symbolic” mirror framing both the librarian and patron during the “imaginary” phase of Lacan’s theory of “subject”, the reference desk can now be seen as a facilitator to the “real” or established identity of the librarian. Once librarians have taken steps to create their own identities, the reference desk experience becomes a working part of their own reality, less compromised than the one they now own communally with the patron.

Reference desk dyads

After examining and applying these theories to help establish identities, librarians can use these identities to open lines of communication between themselves and patrons. How can they identify patrons and their learning needs if they cannot readily identify themselves to themselves and the public at large? An exploration of principles presented by Jerome Bruner, Lev Vygotsky, and Frank Smith will yield a deeper understanding of the learning process that will enable a more productive dialogue to occur between librarian and patron. This in turn will enrich and heighten the patron’s library experience. I will focus on two significant themes impacting the patron’s learning experience:

allowing for individual cognitive styles and recognizing a patron's desire for story or a coherent narrative.

As presented earlier, both Goffman and Simmel liken the self to a performer or actor. They explain that in order “to interact with others successfully, to achieve individual or collective objectives, entails the ability to play a variety of roles and to manipulate the self in order to get from others the desired reactions, responses, or rewards” (Farganis, 1993, p.302)). From the point of view of the librarian, these rewards might allude to being *recognized* as information specialists, being *accepted* as educators, and being *identified* as authoritative guides by their patrons and the public at large. As librarians are able to move past the issue of image, their points of view will change to allow for (as it must) the point of view of the patron as well. Here, a patron's learning experience will become the reward.

As part of the process of establishing these possible identities for themselves, librarians need to equip themselves with tools to maintain this level of assistance and understanding. Medical school interns are provided with a necessary tool as part of their residency training. Fondly known as the “Scut Monkey,” all interns / residents carry a copy of *The Clinician's Pocket Reference* during their program and often beyond. I would suggest that librarians or other information workers be supplied a similar tool, namely a combination of texts by Frank Smith and Jerome Bruner. Prior to the culmination of their academic or technical training, information workers and librarians should be presented with copies of Smith's *To Think* and Bruner's *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*.

Presenting theories instrumental to a field rich in public service and user education, Jerome Bruner and Frank Smith offer insight into the human process of thinking and learning (a statement that Smith would assert is in part redundant as he claims thinking and learning are indistinguishable) in each of their books. Bruner divides his text into three sections dealing with thought, language, and interacting in constructed worlds. The case studies and theory he uses to support his statements are provocative and fit seamlessly with Smith's views on thinking, so much so that they practically entertain a conversation together.

It is impossible to determine a person's cognitive learning style instantly. Be it analytic, thematic, impulsive or reflective, people learn in different ways. And it is important to be mindful that learning styles operate without reference to a person's innate ability or intelligence. Beyond surveys and polls (usually after the fact), it is difficult enough to estimate *why* a patron has decided to visit the library without having to assess the cognition of the patron as well. Even so, I would suggest that it is not only a librarian's task to be aware of these possibilities, but to prepare for the eventuality of all or any of them. Every patron should be considered individually with regard to his/her own learning needs. Smith's discussions of *thinking creatively* in addition to Bruner's thoughts on *possible realities* and *acting in constructed worlds* speak directly to a theme that is central to this essay: the process of defining a unified identity as well as creating several possible identities for librarians as demanded by the current field of information exchange. It is necessary for me to note that each of these books presents the reader with numerous ways of identifying and using creative thinking and language as a means of establishing possible realities as both a learner (patron) or administrator (librarian). In

addition to this, each author offers ways of fostering the flow and/or exchange of information.

In order to fulfill their identity as *educator* or *authoritative guide* to paths of learning, the librarian must go beyond merely maintaining an atmosphere for learning. One way of accomplishing this is through widening the possibilities of learning, something attributed earlier to librarians' contribution to the negative stereotypes surrounding them. Both Bruner and Smith attest to the fact that children and adults learn more quickly and retain more memory of shared experiences in the real. By sharing in this process, librarians are increasing possibilities of learning for their patrons. Librarians will strengthen these identities by taking an active role in the exchange of information, assisting with and entering into the negotiation process by directly addressing patrons' learning needs (obvious examples would be, connecting them with materials they need and helping them to navigate current information technology). Bruner, in accordance with Vygotsky's theories, describes it as a "loan of consciousness" or "consciousness for two" (Bruner, 1986, p.75). In a study that he had conducted, children were better able to navigate conceptual learning with the help of an adult giving them props and clues. This dynamic is changed when the cultural context is different from the one that is already known. In this instance, an adult can be considered as needful of these props and clues. At this point, it clearly becomes the role of the librarian to impart the language of the information in response to the patrons' needs.

Both Bruner and Smith would advise that the creative language used during this exchange is important in that "Language ... enables alternative realities to be constructed, offering possibilities of experience that are not always available"(Smith, 1990, p.112).

Here, librarians must break free from the “shhh” stereotype and speak up. Librarians need to impart to the public that they alone can offer the language, and further still, entertain a discourse needed to help them navigate the current field of information exchange. This human characteristic of interaction, or the dynamic offered through human dialogue, remains one of the essential elements that will continue to make librarians fundamental players in the information field. The World Wide Web search utility, *Jeeves*, apparently attests to this sentiment. Attempting to infuse the technical with some human characteristic, the search engine has been fashioned after a very human example, an English butler. While a servant is not the most desirable image for a helper, the fact that they created the utility in this manner attests to the desire for a human element remaining in the information retrieval process. Understanding this motivation and building upon it will result in librarians and libraries remaining part of this equation.

Smith goes on to offer that, “Learning is easy when it is part of the flow of events in which we are involved, when we can make sense of what we are doing, when the brain is in charge of its own affairs” (Smith, 1990, p.40). Conversely, both children and adults can be susceptible to presupposition when faced with something they might know very well. Bruner imparts that, “If all is in conformity, we adapt and may even stop noticing, as we stop noticing the touch sensation produced by our clothes or the lint on the lens of our eyeglasses” (Bruner, 1986, p.46). In this instance, librarians must be more creative and aggressive in apportioning these props and clues if the patron is to successfully experience an alternative learning experience. Smith maintains that this understanding is possible even in the face of presupposition, “Understanding takes us beyond the known to the new; it makes experience possible” (Smith, p.36). And, this experience will help

solidify these identities of information specialist, educator, and authoritative guide, both to ourselves (and other professionals in the field) and to the public (current and future communities of users). By reading texts like Bruner's and Smith's, librarians can help create an atmosphere that will allow for both the patron and information professional to attune themselves to the conventions necessary to create and benefit from an environment conducive to learning.

Identity leads to Paths of Understanding and Learning

Where to go from here? After establishing possible roles for librarians and other information workers in the library setting, and focusing upon the construction and design of a continuing discourse or open path of communication between patron and information worker, what to do now? Librarians must work to maintain these identities. They must also create new possible ones, building and growing with the current, changing field of information exchange. As part of this process, librarians must continue to explore new learning situations and look for new opportunities to connect with their communities of learners and potential patrons. Obviously, they must change the literature to support this. Tomorrow's librarians, as I referred to them earlier, must produce a professional discourse that reflects the establishment of these new identities of information specialists, educators, and authoritative guides. This literature will disavow its former claim as forum for complaints of old stereotypes, shallow images or misconceptions. Instead, the literature will devote itself to discussing these new identities, providing remedies for

problems or errors in individual performance while strengthening the collective voice of experience and eventual mastery.

I do not mean that librarians' work is complete if they follow the model presented here. Instead, their work is just beginning, with the difference being that it is now "their" work. They have created these identities, they have seen how to put them into use by attempting to better understand their patrons' learning needs and communicating with them in a manner both beneficial and productive. But this must be acknowledged as a continuous process. What I have presented here is just a means of ownership of identity; a process of establishing a more appropriate and responsible series of identities from which to build new and enriched identities to meet the needs of librarians' current and future patrons as the information landscape continues to change and alter itself. I have offered the beginning rhythms of a dialogue calling for action from librarians and interaction with each other as well as with their learning communities. The current field of information exchange is constantly in flux, and as agents of this profession so must librarians be. The ebb and flow continues even as I write this.

Revisiting Earlier Questions

How do librarians' perceptions of themselves impact their role as professionals?

Librarians' perceptions of themselves do impact their role as professionals. In allowing their identities to be defined by public image, particularly negative stereotypes, librarians are missing the opportunity of defining for themselves and the public, appropriate and realistic identities. These identities would provide a better understanding of their roles in

the profession and the services that they can provide to the public. This affects recruitment, retention and job satisfaction of the profession. Librarians need to be self-aware and self confident, establishing who they are and what they do in a clear and resonant voice both to themselves, each other, and the public at large. They also might be mindful of both their personal performance within the field in as a means of establishing a group identity or public perception as Goffman suggests.

Do these negative stereotypes (self-perpetuated and otherwise) undermine their effectiveness as information specialists, educators, and guides to patron's paths of inquiry? As discussed earlier, these stereotypes can and do undermine librarians' effectiveness as information specialists, educators, and guides to paths of inquiry. This happens when nothing is done to dispel these negative stereotypes or provide the public with more viable and appropriate identities. As suggested, marketing might help bring these images and identities into a more realistic and productive focus. This undermining process can also occur when librarians reinforce negative stereotypes by; making the assumption that library users know more than they do, failing to understand the dynamics of their community by not communicating with them, and by not providing an inviting, accessible, and collaborative learning environment for their users. Librarians and the profession would benefit from being mindful of their manner and level of public services, as well as being attuned to their patron's learning needs.

What is the impact of this problem on the library? How does it affect the transaction of information? As presented earlier, negative stereotypes and these issues of image are far reaching into the field of librarianship. They impact salaries, status, professional morale, patron interaction, and ultimately both funding and growth of the

library. The success of the library is impacted as well. If the public fails to recognize librarians as professionals in the field of information, they will not be able to identify the library as a place for them to find and utilize the wealth of information and informational platforms offered there. This in turn directly affects the transaction of information.

When patrons fail to recognize the library as a source for their information and learning needs, they will look for alternative sources. Currently, technology offers numerous information retrieval alternatives. Accordingly, librarians must provide for this by taking active measures to render successful realities or identities to the public, allowing them to recognize them as information specialists, educators, and guides to paths of inquiry.

Librarians can expedite this process by enlisting elements of marketing, which would eventually polling the public for their responses to library services (and in the process glean public perceptions of the roles or identities associated with librarians) but first the public must be offered something upon which to respond.

Possible Paths for Future Inquiry

Much of today's literature surrounding the subject of image in the library profession revolves around existing stereotypes, shallow images and many misconceptions. As I have presented in this essay, the first step in addressing this problem is to understand *why* it is a problem and then work on ways of addressing issues of identity and self. After exploring these themes, I expressed that librarians need to be aggressive in creating identities for themselves as information specialists, educators and authoritative guides. These identities in turn speak to establishing a productive and more useful communication between themselves and their community of learners and future

patrons. I then offered that it must be a continuing process of strengthening and solidifying these identities as well as building upon them to create new possible identities and learning experiences. In keeping with this, I would like to offer some ways of measuring the success of these efforts, and at the same time continuing them by connecting with the community to glean this information in a way that has been virtually unexplored.

Notes from the field were presented earlier, outlining current literature on the image problem. I pointed out the majority of this literature is comprised of opinion articles, with little to no research conducted outside of the field or academia. Herein lies the problem, surveying librarians about themselves is tantamount to a study in a vacuum. Librarians will need to poll outside of their field to gain objectivity on their image and performance as information specialists, educators and authoritative guides. Any and all survey groups should address and reflect the opinions and needs of the community of users and potential patrons. The resulting analysis should lend itself to more constructive findings or recommendations based upon the community's perceptions. Revisiting the earlier discussion of Kies and her suggestions on marketing our profession in accordance with programs instituted by the legal and medical fields, some suggestions for further investigation and discovery can be made.

National surveys and public opinion polls conducted by professional organizations in both the medical and legal field break away from similar ones conducted in the field of librarianship in that their polling population represents members of the public at large. They have not confined their respondents (and subsequently their data)

within their own professions. These studies also diverge in the manner in which data is collected, analyzed and ultimately used.

Responding to the Hart Poll conducted in the mid-1990's, Neal Fink explores the cause as well as the perpetuation of specific stereotypes and public perceptions endemic to the legal profession, in his article entitled "Simple Ways to Improve Attorney-Client Relationships." More importantly, he uses the data to make viable, productive recommendations to the profession on how to correct these problems. He offers that lawyers need to improve desk-side manner or, more specifically, to follow the American Bar Association's Declaration of Commitment to Clients, a professional mission citing ten promises devoted to ensuring the best, most ethical service. Fink also provides more concrete examples: be accessible and responsive to our clients, minimize fee disputes by using engagement letters, discuss billing arrangements openly, etc. (Fink, 1995, p.61). Further professional literature reflects that members in the legal field not only consider Fink's recommendations but test them in the field as well. This creates another thread of discourse on the subject that appears to be equally beneficial to the profession in alleviating or correcting these image problems. Certainly, librarians could benefit by incorporating this type of methodology, analysis, recommendation, and *response* into their own research process.

The medical field utilizes the data from their public opinion polls to equally good effect. Dennis Murray, like Fink, uses the data from a Patient Attitude Survey to make recommendations to the medical field. In his article, "What's Behind Your Profession's Bad Image," Murray considers the results of his 1995 survey and provides the findings as well as a list of ways doctors can improve their patient services, thusly improving their

public image (Murray, 1995, p. 98-103). Like Fink, Murray presents specific examples illustrating his findings, some of them include; spending more time with each patient, providing convenient hours of operation and locations, and meeting with the patient on time, as scheduled. (Murray, 1995)

In addition to what might be gleaned from these successful public opinion studies, librarians could also benefit from doctors' and attorneys' lead into marketing their professions. Both the American Medical Association and the Lawyers Association of England and Wales have launched successful advertising campaigns that help "personalize" and improve their public images.

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