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Reader Response [to Eric Jennings, "The librarian stereotype: How librarians are damaging their image and profession" C&UL 23:1, 93-100]

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Reader response

Volume 23, Issue 1 contains the final column of Eric Jennings, who has served the journal and its readers well for a number of years. The column is entitled “The librarian stereotype: How librarians are damaging their image and profession.” As one would expect, a column with this topic should generate reader interest. I am pleased to publish a letter from a number of readers together with Mr. Jennings’s response.

It is always my pleasure to hear from the journal’s readers.

Christopher Millson-Martula
Editor

The first issue of this year’s *College & Undergraduate Libraries* (Volume 23, Issue 1) includes an opinion piece by column editor Eric Jennings (Jennings 2016) that oversimplifies and dismisses a rich and important body of research regarding occupational stereotyping and its effect on inclusion and diversity within the library profession. Since its publication in March, frustration with this article has appeared on Twitter and other social media platforms, including an excellent critique in the *American Indians in Children’s Literature* blog by Dr. Debbie Reese (Reese 2016). The responses via these open channels are essential in that they reach the widest audience possible; however, a published rebuttal residing within the same peer-reviewed journal as Mr. Jennings’s editorial is also necessary to honor the many voices of dissent that would be otherwise ignored by the scholarly record. As some of the authors whose work was cited by Mr. Jennings, and ultimately accused of “damaging the profession,” we feel compelled to correct his inaccurate understanding of our work and underscore the continued importance of critically evaluating our profession, the image it conveys, and the very real effects these perceptions have on the working populations most likely to be targeted by them.

Stereotypes are not just problematic because of their truthfulness or lack thereof and will not simply go away if we “start acting like professionals by focusing on our jobs first and worrying about our image later” (Jennings 2016, 96). They are problematic because they point to lack of understanding and adequate representation for the group involved. They are problematic because they signal deeper issues of power and oppression that must be addressed if we are to move forward as a society. Willful ignorance of issues of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, ableism, and other modes of oppression does not make them go away. On the contrary, that kind of ignorance only serves to make them worse. And in a profession that is about providing reliable and useful information, we cannot afford to encourage or even engage in that kind of ignorance.

Jennings fails to adequately summarize the research findings in his brief exploration into the literature. For example, when citing Bonnet and McAlexander’s study on reference service, he ignores that their baseline images of reference librarians with neutral expressions were already deemed “relatively approachable” by study participants (Bonnet and McAlexander 2013). Then he uses the modest gains in favorability of smiling persons to infer that Roantree’s outdated and absurd musings—“a light in the eye, a lilt in the voice, a becoming color can mean more to the library profession than all the professional mish-mash put together” (Roantree 1953)—are somehow appropriate. This comes across as ahistorical and grossly out of touch and disregards the cautionary remarks in Bonnet and McAlexander’s conclusion:

However, we do not feel that the outcomes of this study necessarily merit policy changes for a couple of reasons. Firstly, in certain cases, there is the potential for discriminatory practice (for example, by asking librarians to wear specific types of clothes based on their gender or age). We find this practice inappropriate, particularly considering the important role that the library plays in empowering diverse populations. Secondly, not only do the actions we take affect patrons' perceptions of us, but they can affect our own opinions of ourselves (Bonnet and McAlexander 2013).

Our job duties as academics and professionals extend far beyond that of the reference desk. Jennings has missed the point Pagowsky and DeFrain (2014) and others made regarding feminized employment, service work, and warmth. Rather, he is content to tell a profession of more than 80% women that they should essentially smile more, despite the evidence that, as Hess et al. (2009) so succinctly state, “[W]omen generally have less power or status than men ... smiling in women is therefore a form of appeasement behaviour that is adaptive for a low power/status individual.” And as Pagowsky and Rigby (2014) have said, “In the case of information work, we are dealing with asserting our value in a profession, which, on the face of it, is devalued due to stereotypes of subservience and caring. And this is how our worth is defined to the public.”

When considering our impact outside of the profession, Jennings's opinion about librarianship having a tradition of neutrality is incorrect. Libraries, particularly in the United States, have always been sites of “Americanization” or Whiteness-teaching for citizens from marginalized communities, as noted by Wiegand (2015) in his historical survey of the public library, *Part of Our Lives*. Immigrants, people of color, people from the lower classes—all were directed to the library to learn how to best fit into the dominant White, middle-class culture in the way expected of them. Libraries have never been, are not now, and, in many ways, will never be neutral. Neutrality is a codeword for the status quo, which is a stasis of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and all the other -isms.

This issue of work being devalued due to stereotypes is not solely in regards to gender, but also race, class, sexuality, ability, and other factors that should be discussed. Being an “other” as defined by society means having to deal with inherent bias against inherent aspects of one's identity. For example, it is much more difficult to be seen as competent or in a position of authority if you are a woman of color working in a library (or almost anywhere). Doing a good job is not enough. We can see this plainly in collected *LIS Microaggressions* blog posts (<http://lismicroaggressions.tumblr.com/>); Dr. Nicole Cooke's (2014) article, “Pushing Back from the Table,” on her experience of being a woman faculty member of color in LIS; and through numerous projects, research, and association work (e.g., ACRL Diversity Members Initiative Group, <https://ojcs.siue.edu/ojs/index.php/polymath/index>) on diversifying the profession and promoting inclusion throughout ALA and ACRL. We are far away from being able to assume everyone within librarianship is perceived fairly and treated equally by our colleagues and our users, and Jennings's call for shrugging it off shows how his column and this general attitude contribute to the problem. It is a position of luxury and privilege if one does not need to personally consider these issues and examine how one is perceived. But regardless of whether it affects an individual personally, these issues resonate with many in the field and are a systemic issue.


The flaws in Jennings's piece can serve as a clarion call to all of us in the profession to take more active roles in critically examining our work, our images, and our biases. We agree with Jennings that “we should stop banging our head against the wall and do something differently” (Jennings 2016, 99) but to a large degree, we see this happening already. As Mauro has so aptly noted on Twitter, “We don't need neutrality, we need to be critical. Of ourselves, of our collections, of our profession, of our institutions.” Jennings may be content to sacrifice this vitally important step of taking a critical approach to who we are and what we do as information professionals, but many of the rest of us are not. We build communities of

critical reflection on social media through #critlib (<http://twitter.com/hashtag/critlib>) and #libleadgender (<http://twitter.com/hashtag/libleadgender>). We build these communities within our professional organizations through groups such as the previously mentioned ALA Diversity Member Interest Group; the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Round Table (GLBTRT, <http://www.ala.org/glbtrt/glbtrt>); and the racial and ethnic minority groups—the BCALA (<http://bcala.org/>), REFORMA (<http://www.reforma.org/>), and APALA (<http://www.apalaweb.org/>). We also build these communities through carefully considered and deeply reflective research—research that moves us forward by welcoming others to join and shape the conversation, not silence it. Let us continue to build these communities and create more in order to reshape the stereotypes and form a more inclusive profession for us all.

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