Librarians: How would we like to see ourselves?

By Anne Larrivee

When I interviewed for my subject librarian position, I had to present my ideas for the future of reference librarianship. As I sifted through research and helpful visuals, I found two Sesame Street clips: one with Cookie Monster and the other with Grover, both in library settings. The clips were significantly outdated as they showed libraries lacking computers--silence and books were a strong underlying theme. I presented one of these clips during my interview because I wanted to describe how librarians were once portrayed as silence-keepers, more focused on books than people.

Bennett reports that librarianship has changed as it has shifted toward a more learning-centered approach (188). Therefore, librarians have become more person-centered, wanting to understand the learning needs of their library users. One of the best ways to do this is to diversify the staff and become more culturally competent. In her book chapter, "Dismiss the Stereotype! Combating Racism and Continuing Our Progress," Margaret Gibson emphasizes the importance of moving past the notions of how a librarian is traditionally supposed to look. She describes how she receives many surprised reactions when she informs students of her chosen profession at career fairs (229). Gibson serves as an important reminder that librarians need not fit into a narrow pre-carved box. In fact, she helps contribute valuable perspectives to the institution she serves. Patricia M. Overall also supports the value in diversifying and educating the staff based upon cultural needs (175). Overall challenges notions of how cultural competence is developed and how to best weave it into the profession (176). A culturally competent workplace would certainly be a welcoming invitation for a new generation of librarians-to-be.

Whether we like it or not, stereotypes can shape the perspectives of librarianship. Many are familiar with the various stereotypical images of librarians as a non-diverse group of older, stuffy women who shelve books all day! The media has long played a part in perpetuating these stereotypes and for those who link their identity to their professions, these long-held images may have stifled their desire to explore librarianship. These preconceived, non-diverse portrayals aren't relatable for many people, particularly racial and ethnic minorities. Media and iconic trends can really shape the way younger generations perceive librarianship. However, it is important that librarians come together to encourage a diverse group of peers to join their ranks. As librarianship diversifies, we will eventually witness the dismantling of preconceived notions of how a librarian is supposed to look.

According to Wrobleswiski and Huston, Cultivation Theory plays a key role in socialization. The consciousness of young people is affected when they see certain occupational norms represented in the media and, as a result, they become more accepting and comfortable with those ideas (284). So, if young people always see the same limited depictions of librarians, these often negative connotations may resonate with them and in turn, discourage them from pursuing librarianship. They will instead pursue an occupation they feel they can relate to better, rather than the non-diverse library environment they have been
exposed to in the media. An article by Linda Wallace titled: "The Image- and What You Can Do About It In the Year of the Librarian," helps provide a visual overview of some of the classic images.

For now, librarians do what they can to challenge the stereotypes. Ramirose Atlebury addresses how librarians use Youtube to combat against traditionally negative librarian stereotypes (4). Out of 100 librarian-created Youtube videos, Atlebury found that librarians typically like to depict themselves as heroes or heroines, sometimes through parody, other times through an educational format (6). As librarians continue to fight against race, gender, and other stereotypes, it is important for them to recognize the value of their efforts. It is not only in defense of their personal reputation, but it also evokes a message of empowerment and informs the idea that new realities of librarianship will exist among future generations. The more librarians vocalize their differences, the more librarians will set themselves apart as a group that cannot be defined by an image.

There is no doubt that librarian stereotypes will change and adapt to new generations overtime. Since various stereotypes will continue to exist, the hope is that they can at least be represented by a truly diverse new generation of librarians, in turn inspiring new social groups to consider exploring the profession. In many ways, these trends have begun to emerge already, as shown by Gibson and many others who represent diverse backgrounds. Currently, the realities of a diverse world are still very limited in the profession. Although many of us know that we may fit some of the stereotypes out there, such as appearance (i.e. glasses and sweaters) or in terms of race and/or gender, let's not over-glamorize these traits as 'the way to look.' Rather, let's be grateful that one day this 'look' may complement one of many diverse images of people in the profession.

References


