

# Pervasive Myth or Pop Culture Relic? College students' Experience of the Librarian Stereotype

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## Abstract

This study explores the wider institutional discourse from which stereotypes of librarians emerge. The findings shed light on the discursive practices (e.g. the methods, the rituals, and the interactions) that take place between students and library staff, and how these inform the student's perspective and experience of the librarian stereotype. This study utilizes the theoretical framework presented by Radford and Radford's study entitled "Libraries, Librarians, and the Discourse of Fear" published in 2001 which argued that it is within this discourse that negative stereotypes of the librarian emerge. The students strongly expressed a fear of the library environment and atmosphere, and being intimidated by a librarian's knowledge but collectively the students did not report being scared of librarians. Rather, they viewed librarians as meek and feeble – which, despite being a negative stereotype, is not the dominant one that persists in popular culture.

**Keywords:** librarian stereotypes, librarian image, discourse of fear, librarian myth, discourse analysis

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## 1 Introduction

Few professions can match the self-image preoccupation (and subsequent anxiety) that experts within the Library and Information Science (LIS) field contend with on an almost-daily basis in everyday situations such as being in a restaurant or bar or responding to questions (from friends as well as strangers) about their occupation. Those of us who work in the LIS profession are not unfamiliar to encountering comments such as "Where's your bun?", "You don't dress like a librarian", and "I like to read, I should be a librarian too!" Admittedly, such comments can be amusing but they also remind us of the pervasiveness of the librarian stereotype which continues to demean the LIS profession in attaining standing and recognition amongst other professions. Stereotypical image/s of librarians are perpetuated by media and popular culture (e.g. movies, novels, children's stories) and perhaps those within the LIS profession are also culpable for not having done enough to combat the stereotype. Cullen (2000) warns:

"If future politicians, university deans, and other fund managers are brought up on a diet of popular movies and TV shows that never realistically portray the services librarians offer, none of them will value our skills and expertise enough to keep us in business" (p. 142).

However, it is not the intention of this study to investigate or indeed, bemoan the representations of librarian stereotypes in popular culture. In order to better understand the persistence of librarian stereotypes we must turn our attention to the wider cultural discourse from which such stereotypes emerge and flourish. These stereotypes are situated within the structures of what Radford & Radford (2000) have termed 'the discourse of fear.' That is, the institutional practices, speech and symbols that seek to control discourse. The Radford's approach to discourse is directly influenced by Michael Foucault's notion that all discourse is controlled by the imposition of certain discursive practices within institutions. The interactions between library staff and patrons provide a variety of examples where the adopted roles reify the image of the librarian as knowledge keeper (and therefore holder of power) and patron as a subordinate. For instance,

the reference desk librarian as the keeper of order of not only the stacks but noise levels on the floor, exemplify such practices from which stereotyped characteristics such as the stern or officious librarian emerge. These stereotypes also extend to the perceived work of librarians as largely clerical in nature where the utmost obsession of the librarian is orderliness.

The overarching purpose of this study is to examine how the discourse of fear unfolds within an actual library setting through close examination of staff-patron interactions and patron perceptions. This study seeks to investigate the persistence of librarian stereotypes amongst college students through observing and documenting college students' experiences of interacting with librarians and non-professional library staff. It is only through documenting patrons' experiences and attempting to understand their perceptions of LIS professionals that we can begin to address how the institutional practices might contribute to the pervasiveness (and perhaps persuasiveness) of the librarian stereotype. I argue that the meaning behind the stereotype is not to be found in popular representations of librarians but within the discursive practices and symbols of the profession itself.

## 2 Excerpt from Literature Review

It is perhaps no surprise that virtually all the literature addressing the image of the LIS profession or LIS professionals comes from LIS publications. The existing scholarship addressing the librarian stereotypes can broadly be categorized into two distinct approaches: (1) studies examining popular representations of librarians in media; and (2) studies calling on LIS professionals for the need to adopt more effective marketing strategies to counteract the impact of negative stereotypes. There are others but not nearly enough to form a distinctive third category. Both the identified categories of scholarly work have been useful in this study for helping identify what the prevalent stereotypes are as well as offering suggestions for combating the stereotyped images.

## 3 Method

### 3.1 Theoretical approach

This study adopted a panoramic understanding of what is meant by discourse and aimed to understand the term beyond the confines of spoken and written communication. Libraries are treated very much as institutions with their own unique discourse. This discourse is accessible to the researcher by examining the discursive practices, methods, rituals, and interactions that take place in the institution of a library. The theoretical framework for this research was largely inspired by Radford and Radford's study entitled "Libraries, Librarians, and the Discourse of Fear" published in 2001. The Radford's central argument is that the 'discourse of fear' is a "universal and totalizing organizing principal that gives the library its place in modern cultural forms;" (2001, p.323) and it is within this discourse from which negative stereotypes of the librarian emerge.

This study seeks to explore the wider institutional discourse from which the librarian stereotypes emerge. By conducting observations of two library reference desks I wanted to shed light on these discursive practices and capture the students' perspective and experience of the librarian stereotype. The key research questions driving the data collection and analysis were:

- What are the discursive practices /symbols /language that reinforce the librarian stereotype?
- How is the stereotype experienced by students if at all?
- To what extent do the observed activities, staff-student interactions and student experiences reflect the discourse of fear?

## 3.2 Data collection

### 3.2.1 Focus Group

There were 7 participants in the one hour session, plus the moderator. I began the focus group by briefly introducing myself and giving a 5 minute overview of the research project. The participants were all USC students (all American nationals; 1 grad, 6 undergrads; 2 white males, 4 white females and 1 black female). I had advertised free pizza as an incentive for students to participate. The focus group was recorded using a laptop PC sound recorder placed in the middle of a table, and later transcribed.

### 3.2.2 Field notes from Two Observation sessions

Two separate observations were conducted at two different locations: The circulation desk of the Business Library and the Government Information Reference Desk at the Thomas Cooper Library. Each session lasted 2 hours and 15 minutes, and detailed field notes were taken.

## 3.3 Data analysis

One of the fundamental theoretical assumptions of this study was that the librarian stereotypes emerge from a ‘discourse of fear’ and so my initial analytical categories were adapted from the Radford’s 2001 study. However, I broadened and neutralized these constructs, so for example, the ‘humiliation of the user’ became ‘interaction’ which was all about documenting the staff and student interactive experience whether positive or negative. The librarian as ‘formidable gatekeeper’ construct was broadened to ‘librarian.’ I also had a separate category for ‘discursive practices’ that captured the methods and rituals that unfolded. The library as ‘other worldly’ and ‘cathedral’ were merged to create the category of ‘surroundings’ which would help contextualize comments about the building and atmosphere within the library.

Category Name	Description
Interaction	Transactional; positive or negative experience;
Librarian	Experience of the librarian stereotype; physical appearance; personality traits; knowledge (i.e. gatekeeper)
Discursive practices	Daily work practices; the work witnessed during observation and by students; the rituals; the methods of a librarian’s practice
Surroundings	Building features; general environment and atmosphere experienced

Table 1: Summary of categories adopted for coding data.

Using the above-categories I studied students’ comments and I then examined the discourse (viewpoints expressed, language, the interactions and discursive practices) captured in my data by conceptualizing the extent to which the data supported or negated the ‘discourse of fear’ thesis underpinning this study. These categories capture the essence of the institutional discourse of a library, and it is within these realms that I believe the stereotype of the librarian emerges.

## 4 Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Interaction

Radford and Radford assert that “within the discourse of fear, the librarian is also portrayed as a fearsome figure, and as one capable of handing out punishment in the form of public humiliation” (2001, 313). However, all of the interactions observed between library staff and student were friendly and polite; there were no overt acts of public humiliation. During the observation of the Government Information reference desk, there were two instances where students were told politely to not put reels back into the draws because the library wanted to track usage. Mike (the reference librarian) in a slightly raised voice said “excuse me,

you don't need to put it back, we need to track which ones get most used, so if you just leave it on that [Mike points] trolley." In both instances, the students apologized and looked embarrassed when told, presumably because the librarian had brought attention to the offending student in front of others, accentuated by the silence in the reading room. Regardless of the politeness of Mike's instructions, all interactions that took place at the reference desk were one-way instructions from the librarian on how to do something, be it operating the microfilm readers, locating the microfilm, or searching the databases. However, the interaction was always friendly and Mike was always attempting to make the students more comfortable by engaging in conversation with them.

The observations made at the Business library circulation/reference desk reflected the type of experiences reported by students in the focus group. Throughout the observation, there was minimal staff-student interaction despite the library being busy. Furthermore, the interactions that did take place were quite transactional in nature. For example, the overwhelming majority of interactions witnessed involved students coming up to the desk to ask a simple query about borrowing stationary or asking for a non-reference query. All except one student in the focus group described their interactions with library staff in a way that resembled a simple transaction, which also seemed to contribute to why the students' had a lack of understanding about the librarian's profession. This is exemplified in the following statement from a participant in the focus group:

Gerry: Generally, I mean, honestly, uh, I know it's a profession – it's a highly specialized profession – but I kind of associate the same way I would, like, uh, a clerk, a store clerk at Publix, you know. I try to find something myself, can't find it, I'll ask them, um, and I use the exact same tone, exact same manner with them as I would with a librarian.

This response highlights one of the major difficulties experienced by the profession, which is that it is not as highly regarded as other professions. The comparison of a librarian to a worker at Publix supermarket suggests this student had never experienced any specialized skills demonstrated by a librarian. This happened to be the case with most of the students in the group, only one person had knowingly dealt with a qualified librarian (the others admitted to be unable to distinguish between library workers and qualified librarians).

## 4.2 Librarian

Of the five library workers observed, only two did not conform to some or all of the physical attributes associated with the stereotype. In fact, Helen and Mary did not conform to the stereotypical image apart from the fact that they were both women (incidentally both were fully qualified librarians). They were dressed quite fashionably, in business attire, wore make up, and high heels (as opposed to "sensible shoes" worn by the frumpy librarian stereotype), and crucially they didn't wear glasses. On the other hand Jennifer, Monica and Mike did reflect some physical attributes of the stereotype. For example, all three wore glasses, were dressed quite plainly and unfashionably. This stereotypical physical image of the librarian was something that most of the students said they had experienced with some of the staff at the USC library. The following exchange about a library worker illustrates the students' experience of the stereotype:

Gerry: He doesn't blink.

Gerry: I mean, he's like a creepy librarian

Gerry: Yeah, he does hunch a lot, which makes him look shorter, and he wears his pants really high up.

Danielle: He walks kind of funny. He walks slow.

Carter: He has a strange way of speaking too.

Danielle: He has an interesting voice. His eyes are kind of dead. Anna says that he's "nice"

Describing the library worker as "creepy" and "odd" fits into the discourse of fear in that the library (and librarians) are "strange" or even ghostly. Almost none of the students expressed a 'fear of the librarian' or spoke of feeling intimidated. The students did not concur with the image of a stern or bossy librarian, instead the language they used suggested a view of the librarian as feeble or weak. For example, one participant said:

Emily: I think I don't feel intimidated. If anything, I think I have this idea that even, like, the men there are, like, meek. [Several people laugh] Like, I could beat you in a fight. Give me the book I need. [Laughs] I don't know.

This quote reflected the consensus in the group, although, one participant admitted feeling intimidated by how knowledgeable the librarian was rather than being scared of a librarian. Others also expressed views which conformed to the stereotype of librarians always being women, and that the men in the profession were effeminate or "not into sports." Another student's primary association with the library staff was arguing about fines. This fits within the idea of the discourse of fear where the librarian as rule keeper and issue of punishment is one of the primary experiences that shape a user's perception. A widely held misconception was illustrated by one of the participants who stated "I always ask the librarian what's the best book to read. It's a library! [laughs]." Once again confirming the stereotype; associating librarian with bookishness and not displaying an appreciation for the varied nature of the profession.

### 4.3 Discursive practices

The majority of students coming to the circulation desk/reference desk did so to use the stapler, ask for stationary, or ask about a computer issue. In the only reference query during the observations in the Business Library, a student asked the librarian "did you study business because you really know what you're talking about?" This example once again highlights the stereotyped association of the profession with being primarily administrative or clerical in nature, and not very specialized. However it did not fit into the stereotype of a formidable and knowledgeable librarian.

In my observations of a large number of reference queries at the government information reference desk, the ritual that was followed in all of the queries was one where the student comes to the librarian for information – it is by default a practice in which the librarian adopts the role as knowledge-keeper and disseminator, and the student acts as knowledge-seeker. The adoption of these roles is inherent to the structure of a reference inquiry and encapsulates the power relationship as well as potentially intimidation that may result. However, most of the students had only experienced transactional interactions with library staff and some even said they did not think the librarian was capable of helping them.

### 4.4 Surroundings

According to Radford and Radford, in popular culture "the librarian is represented, not as a person, but as an extension of the library itself" (2001, 313). This comment was reflected by one of the participants in the focus group who said that librarians "almost seem antiquated. Like, like from another time. Like they've been living in the library for centuries now." This perspective fits within the discourse of fear notion of the library as a 'mysterious' place. Other students also used words like "tomb," "catacombs," "creepy," "scary," "unnatural," and "weird," to describe the surroundings. They also expressed a feeling of being intimidated by the building. This again suggests a strong presence of the discourse of fear in the language being used to describe the students' experience of the library. In the focus group, the general consensus, with exception of two students, was that the students were uncomfortable with the silence of the library. The essence of this is captured in the following exchanges:

Anna: And you have no cell phone reception.

Emily: You know what they call that? A dead zone

Anna: It's like a Stephen King novel down there.

Gerry: No cell phone reception, all these, like shadowy places for like Freddy Krueger or someone to come out

Danielle: It's quite literally a grave. You go underground, you're dead.

Comparisons to a horror movie-like atmosphere confirm the presence of the discourse of fear in many of these students' experience of the library as an eerie and even haunting environment.

## 5 Conclusion

In summary, from the data collected, students strongly expressed a fear of the library environment and atmosphere. However, the fear of humiliation notion, despite witnessing a librarian politely telling-off students during my observations, was not something the participants in the focus group had experienced. One person expressed being intimidated by a librarian's knowledge but they did not report being scared of librarians. Nevertheless, there was a reluctance expressed by the students in wanting to interact with library staff or ask for help. I believe this is partially explained by the inherent nature of the student-librarian relationship and interaction which can be explained by the discourse of fear thesis. Finally, the students had experienced various librarian stereotypes (e.g. a female dominated profession, unfashionable-dress, work is mainly clerical) but had also rejected or not experienced the stereotype of librarians being stern and intimidating. Rather, they viewed librarians as meek and feeble – which, despite being a negative stereotype, is not the dominant one that persists in popular culture.

This study revealed interesting results about how students experience the librarian stereotype. Inevitably the limited data gathered make it harder to contextualize the results into the wider cultural narrative but replicating the approach and methods used in this study at different institutions could help generate data for enhancing our understanding of, and ultimately combating, the persistent negative librarian stereotype.

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Table 1: Summary of categories adopted for coding data.....600