

Rebuttal to “The librarian stereotype: How librarians are damaging their image and profession”

The current issue of this year's *College & Undergraduate Libraries* (Volume 23, Issue 1) includes an opinion piece by column editor Eric Jennings¹ 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.² 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.

¹ Eric Jennings, "The Librarian Stereotype: How Librarians are Damaging Their Image and Profession," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 23, no. 1 (2016): 93-100.

² Debbie Reese, "Eric Jennings, Sherman Alexie, and Damaging Perceptions about Alcohol Use Amongst Native Peoples," *American Indians in Children's Literature*, March 23, 2016, <http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/2016/03/eric-jennings-sherman-alexie-and.html>

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.”³ 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.⁴ 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”⁵—are somehow appropriate. This comes across as ahistorical and grossly out of touch, and disregards the cautionary remarks in Bonnet and McAlexander’s conclusion:

³ Jennings, 96.

⁴ Jennifer Bonnet & Ben McAlexander, “First Impressions and the Reference Encounter: The Influence of Affect and Clothing on Librarian Approachability,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 39, no. 4 (2013): 335-346. http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/lib_staffpub/16/.

⁵ Dorothy Roantree, “Should Librarians Be Glamour Girls?” *Wilson Library Bulletin*, March 1953, 521.

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.⁶

Our job duties as academics and professionals extend far beyond that of the reference desk. Jennings has missed the point Pagowsky and DeFrain⁷ 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, Adams, and Kleck 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.”⁸ And as Pagowsky and Rigby 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.”⁹

When considering our impact outside of the profession, Jennings's opinion about librarianship having a tradition of neutrality is incorrect. Libraries, particularly in the U.S.,

⁶ Jennifer Bonnet and Ben McAlexander, “First Impressions and the Reference Encounter: The Influence of Affect and Clothing on Librarian Approachability.” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 39, no. 4 (2013): 268.

⁷ Nicole Pagowsky and Erica DeFrain, “Ice Ice Baby: Are Librarian Stereotypes Freezing Us out of Instruction?” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (2014), <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/ice-ice-baby-2/>.

⁸ Ursula Hess, et al., “Face Gender and Emotion Expression: Are Angry Women more Like Men?” *Journal of Vision* 9, no. 12 (2009): 516.

⁹ Nicole Pagowsky and Miriam Rigby, *The Librarian Stereotype: Deconstructing Perceptions and Presentations of Information Work* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2014), 10.

have always been sites of “Americanization” or whiteness-teaching for citizens from marginalized communities as noted by Wiegand in his historical survey of the public library, *Part of Our Lives*.¹⁰ 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;¹¹ Dr. Nicole Cooke’s article, Pushing Back from the Table, on her experience of being a woman faculty member of color in LIS;¹² and through numerous projects, research, and association work (e.g., ACRL Diversity Members Initiative Group¹³) 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

¹⁰ Wayne A. Wiegand, *Part of Our Lives: A People’s History of the American Public Library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹¹ LIS Microaggressions blog, <http://lismicroaggressions.tumblr.com/>

¹² Nicole Cooke, “Pushing Back from the Table,” *Polymath* 4, no. 2 (2014): 39-49, <https://ojcs.siue.edu/ojs/index.php/polymath/index>

¹³ ACRL Diversity Members Initiative Group, <https://ojcs.siue.edu/ojs/index.php/polymath/index>.

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,"¹⁴ 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 and #libleadgender.¹⁵ 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, and the racial and ethnic minority groups—the BCALA, REFORMA, and APALA.¹⁶ 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

¹⁴ Jennings, 99.

¹⁵ #critlib, <http://twitter.com/hashtag/critlib>; #libleadgender, <http://twitter.com/hashtag/libleadgender>.

¹⁶ GLBTRT, <http://www.ala.org/glbtrt/glbtrt>; BCALA, <http://bcala.org/>; REFORMA, <http://www.reforma.org/>; APALA, <http://www.apalaweb.org/>

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.

Signed,

Erica DeFrain

April Hathcock

Turner Masland

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Annie Pho

Miriam Rigby

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Erica's note on Roantree: I have no idea why he even brought this up.

"it is painted in the hope that the profession and all the wonderful people in it I have met will wake up to realize that 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. Let librarians cease haggling over cataloging niceties. Let them rather concentrate on the nicety of a smile to the very next person who comes in." p. 521

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B3dWz9oekgc0YzNIT0I2U2g1S1k>

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Quotes to address:

- "Frankly, I'm tired of seeing, reading, or hearing about [librarian stereotypes]...I think that we as a profession need to get over it and ourselves."
- "Surely that's not what we want for librarians who will represent us for the next twenty, thirty, or forty years, is it?"
- "I personally would rather focus on doing my job and doing it well regardless of how I dress or what people think of when I tell them that I am a librarian."
- "I feel it would be more worth our while to focus on what we do—instruction, reference, cataloging, making our website more user-friendly, etc.—and do that well to change people's opinions of us (i.e., let the public's perception of us change over time) rather than write another article about it or talking among ourselves at a library conference."
- I hope, however, that this is the last time the topic needs to be discussed in a public forum for a very long time. Unfortunately, I don't think that we have the wherewithal within the profession to stop talking about it.
- I saw Sherman Alexie speak, and one of the things that stuck with me is that there's always some truth to a stereotype
- If we think of ourselves as professionals, we need to start acting like professionals by focusing on our jobs first and worrying about our image later.
- It seems like we've been complaining about and trying to change our stereotype for a really long time—100+ years—and we've not gotten away from what we librarians deem a negative image in the public sphere. Maybe we should stop banging our head against the wall and do something differently?

Planning space:

Structure -

Division of labor - Nicole/compile first draft and structure, edit in blurbs; Erica/pull and organize quotes from article within draft

(Other tasks could be checking sources Jennings used to show how he has a shallow understanding or assigning yourself one particular point and focusing writing on that; someone else could edit once this is near complete)

Timeline - sent to journal before next issue is published (not sure of deadline?); also publish this somewhere publicly. Deadline for us: have a response written within 2 weeks?

Brainstorm space:

From Erica, "...Particularly one that addresses this privileged statement: "I personally would rather focus on doing my job and doing it well regardless of how I dress or what people think of when I tell them that I am a librarian." Sigh. Just do your job and sexism and racism will just disappear!"

Also thinking about the privileged position from which the author writes. As he's a column editor for the journal, it becomes all the more disturbing to think about the power he wields in which submissions get published and the topics solicited for publication in the first place.

From Annie, "I'm in the midst of a research project that clearly illustrates that you are not seen as competent or in a position of authority if you are a woman of color working in a library. Doing a good job is not enough."

From Nicole: I think we should also call out his incredibly shallow understanding of these issues and how many of the sources cited (by us, Radfords, Carmichael) address this ignorant and privileged point of view

Some points the author makes:

- "Reactionary inferiority complex"
- Librarians who are aware of the stereotype will start the profession with a chip on their shoulders and have that for the next 20, 30, 40 years
- "I personally would rather focus on doing my job and doing it well regardless of how I dress or what people think of when I tell them that I am a librarian. Does he like rules and conformity? Does he like to read? Is he gay? I'm not saying that the public's perception isn't important—we are a service profession after all—and if the public is turned off by us wholeheartedly, then we won't have a profession for much longer. What I am saying, however, is that I feel it would be more worth our while to focus on what we do—instruction, reference, cataloging, making our website more user-friendly, etc.—and do that well to change people's opinions of us (i.e., let the public's

perception of us change over time) rather than write another article about it or talking among ourselves at a library conference.”

- “Bonnet and McAlexander (2013, 266) studied the approachability of librarians based on visual characteristics such as clothing style, facial expressions, and how they were situated. They found that the only visual cue that had a positive effect for each user group (undergraduate, graduate, faculty/staff) was smiling. This wouldn't surprise Roantree, who suggested in 1953 that smiling was the easiest thing librarians could do to improve their image (521).” -is he telling a predominantly women field to “just smile” ??
- “If students are afraid to come up to a librarian because they might be rebuffed for not knowing the intricacies of the call number system, or our inability to tell our story makes our library instruction sessions ineffective, are there things that you can do at your library to change that impression? **Maybe the librarians on your staff need some customer service training.**”
- In conclusion: essentially states that investigating our stereotypes and their effects is “insanity”

Also: the writing and argument overall are so weak, how the heck did this pass peer-review???

Turner's stream of consciousness thoughts:

This article reeks of academic privilege. There are real world threats to libraries, and public libraries are particularly vulnerable as their funding is contingent on the voters. Librarians need to communicate their value, especially if their funding is on the ballot. Often times these means being a library advocate who has to fight entrenched stereotypes in order to demonstrate that their library is not an archive but a vibrant community resource

This article lacks critical thought: what about traditionally underserved populations who are not represented on the other side of the desk? This article does not look through their eyes, only through the eyes of a privileged white man. I am thinking particularly to the chapter that Annie and I wrote that talks about rise of diversity among student populations, but not faculty/staff populations in universities. And how diverse faculty and staff (which cuts directly against the librarian stereotype) helps support student retention.

His closing sentence: Maybe we should stop banging our head against the wall and do something differently? That is what we are actively doing: trying to change the stereotype through scholarly discussion, #critlib, etc...

Sherman Alexie analogy: do we really want to compare ourselves to a problematic and oppressive cultural stereotype without further critical discussion? I understand what Alexie is saying, but we need to look out the real (outside) reasons why American Indians are given the alcoholic stereotype

Thinking more about this, I guess I have three questions: 1) Structure, how do we want to build this rebuttal? 2) Division of labor, who should do what? 3) Timeline, when do we want this finished by? Do we want to get it into the next issue?

April: Yes, it is particularly troubling the surface level approach the author takes to issues of representation, privilege, and agency. Stereotypes aren't just problematic because of whether they are true or not. 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.

Also, the whole bit about librarianship having a tradition of neutrality is bullshit. Libraries, particularly in the U.S., have always been sites of "Americanization" or whiteness-teaching for citizens from marginalized communities. 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.

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