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The Use of Psychological Defense Mechanisms - By Librarians and the Public – in Response to Traditional and Binary Librarian Stereotypes

Images of librarians in popular culture include the traditional stereotype - of a mousy spinster who cares more for protecting books than for helping people - as well as several contrasting or binary images - such as librarians who are wild by night (although quiet by day), know-it-alls (rather than know-nothings), or high-tech (instead of old-fashioned.) In response to the anxiety provoked by the more pernicious aspects of these images, both librarians and the public may employ a variety of common unconscious defense mechanisms. This chapter examines some of those used by the public - including stereotyping, and splitting or binary thinking, themselves - as well as others - such as reaction formation and over-identification - used by librarians. By making these conscious, and substituting them with more effective coping mechanisms, librarians can improve their self-image, as well as their public image, advancing their psychological and work lives, as well as the support and use of libraries by the public.

The Traditional Librarian Stereotype

I remember when the librarian was a much older woman. Kindly, discrete, unattractive. We didn't know anything about her private life. We didn't want to know anything about her private life. She didn't have a private life.

Mr. Bookman, *The Library Cop*, in *Seinfeld*, "The Library"

Look at her. This is a lonely woman looking for companionship. Spinster. Virgin. Maybe she got hurt a long time ago. She was a schoolgirl. There was a boy. It didn't work out. Now she needs a little tenderness. She needs a little understanding. She needs a little Kramer.

Kramer, in *Seinfeld*, "The Library"

My colleagues, old maid Marians to a man...

Richard Powers, *The Gold Bug Variations*

Although libraries are meaningful, even magical, places to many, the negative stereotype of the librarian as an old, rule-obsessed spinster, with glasses on her nose and her hair in a bun, remains a widely recognizable signifier in popular culture. Of course, as with everything, the meaning of "librarian" – as well as "libraries" – is also continually in flux, and open to multiple interpretations across time, cultures and individuals. (Adams, 2000; Tancheva, 2005) Still, the image remains a well-known, intractable, and even somewhat amusing, if not always endearing, stereotype in popular culture; one with the potential for negative psychological consequences for librarians and the public they want to serve, as well as real threats to increasingly beleaguered libraries.

Certainly, versions of this traditional librarian stereotype existed long before 1876, when Melvil Dewey over-optimistically wrote, in the first issue of *Library Journal*, that the days of a librarian as a "mouser in musty books" were already past (Dewey, 1876, p.6).

Its particulars solidified around the late 19th century, when women began joining the profession and soon made up its majority (Garrison, 1972). Much of the stereotype also applies to men, who are similarly portrayed as meek and bookish, with a bow tie substituting for a bun. However, male versions, at least historically, have also included assumptions about their masculinity and sexual preferences, as well as insinuations about their competence for any other job (Carmichael, 1992; Morissey & Case, 1988; Wiebe, 2005; Passet, 1993).

This stereotype persists today, in all forms of popular media. One recent newspaper article from the U.S. vividly captures this image, even if only to dispute it: “Librarians? Aren’t they supposed to be bespectacled women with a love of classic books and a perpetual annoyance with talkative patrons – the ultimate humorless shushers?” (Jesella, 2007). Another, from the U.K., declaims against the negative impact of these images on libraries, asserting, “The old clichés do not help the cause, given that ... librarians are either diffident, mole-eyed types or disappointed spinsters of limited social skills who spend their time blacking out the racing pages and razoring Page 3” (Bathurst, 2011).

Discussions of a psychological librarian “type” are even found in the professional library literature, itself, where, if nothing else, librarians have been reported to be more introverted than the general population (Wilson, 1982; Caputo, 1984; Douglass, 1957). As one librarian wrote, “People who lack the protective pride of an exclusive, ego-centered self to propel them through the jungle of human needs, styles, and ambitions often seek out work which minimizes confrontations and conflicts” (Wiener, 1989). Of course, this portrayal is a mischaracterization of both librarians and the realities of library work today. When occupational testing was in vogue, however, psychological tests also seemed to identify a librarian type (Bryan, 1952; Scherdin, 1994; Agada, 1994). Upon analysis, though, such research is suspect because of methodological flaws, such as limited sample sizes, self-reporting, and certain leading and stereotypical assumptions about masculinity, femininity, etc. (Fisher, 1988; Newmeyer, 1976).

Although the word “stereotyped” has been used in relation to librarian images for over 100 years, in the past, librarians were more concerned about not

being portrayed at all in novels and other creative art , or only “here and there” because their work lacked “drama” (Keller, 1909; McReynolds, 1985; Pearson, 1910; Kunitz, 1934). Today, however, while male librarians, as well as librarians from around the world and from diverse cultural backgrounds remain under-represented, librarians are regularly portrayed in the media and popular culture (Thomas, 2007). [For a selection of just some of the many discussions about the traditional stereotype, see Appendix.] As a result, the concern that librarians now have centers specifically on the negative or stereotypical aspects of their image(s). “We resent the stereotypes which entirely and absurdly miss the mark of our being” and that portray “the librarian as somewhat less than fully human” (Wiener, 1989).

The first step in understanding why this traditional stereotype remains so evocative and psychologically powerful is to consider how and why it developed. To do so, librarians need to look to theoretical frameworks beyond library and information science, of which psychology is surely one (Radford, G.P., 2003). In addition, there are important historical, sociological, feminist and economic theories. In the early years of public libraries, librarians sought to guide what people read in order to improve and better integrate them into the status quo, making librarians elitist, authoritarian figures, and leading to a “century-long dynamic of misunderstanding, distrust, and generalized estrangement” (Nauratil, 1989, p. 41). Also, historically, since women who worked were generally unmarried, the spinster image developed (Newmeyer, 1976). Similarly, underpaid librarians had little time or money to worry about their hair or clothes which could explain the frumpy stereotype (Gerhardt,1980). There is also a general history of anti-intellectualism, at least in the United States, that librarians and other knowledge workers contend with. Meanwhile, librarianship has long been a female dominated profession, which ties it to the idea of serving and subservience. The economic argument, that, “no matter how much lip service was paid to the adage ‘knowledge is power,’ people who organized and made knowledge available on a nonprofit and voluntary, non-fee basis rather than creating and selling it, would not be generally considered as powerful” (Dain, 1983) is also relevant to the development of the librarian stereotype, as is the sociological argument that “stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross

inequalities of power” (Hall, 1997).

There are also certain aspects of historical and contemporary library work that contribute to the stereotype, such as its technical nature, which can serve to “alienate librarians from the public.” (Nauratil, 1989, p. 43). That librarians are connected to books is true historically, if only because they were just making use of the most current technology. However, books are also powerful signifiers, representing both knowledge and the past, so this connection remains strong. The public, for their part, often cannot distinguish between the more visible clerical work that they see being done in libraries, and the professional work done in back offices, and understaffing also contributes to this confusion of roles. In addition, although librarians are rethinking much of what they do, particularly as they transition to the use of more digital information, they still have to concern themselves with what can seem like picky rules and details so as to preserve the order and condition of their physical collections (Kuntzman & Paulson, 1999; Radford, **M.L.** & Radford, **G.P.**, 1997).

As for psychological explanations, this stereotype is really just a combination, and the latest incarnation, of two more ancient and universal archetypes, those of the Jungian Senex, or wise, old sage, on the positive side, and the witch or the hag, on the less flattering side. In Jungian analytic psychology, these archetypes are thought to be in the collective unconscious, which is why there is such a “strong reaction” from both librarians and library users; this “is often a sign of the presence of an unconscious archetype” (Engle, 2006).

In addition, because librarians must enforce some rules to maintain order, they are perceived as authority figures to fear and rebel against (Radford, **G.P.** & Radford, **M.L.**, 2001). The librarian as stern, forbidding and controlling is also related to the association of the library with order and rationality, and librarians and patrons may both believe that the patron who threatens this order must be sternly dealt with (Radford, **M.L.** & Radford, **G.P.**, 1997). Many defenses are formed in childhood, when every adult seems old, and every space imposing, and when

childish exuberance may make librarians seem to be constantly shushing them. Stephen King, in an Introduction to his novella, *The Library Policeman*, writes that, “I had loved the library as a kid...I had also feared it. I feared becoming lost in the dark stacks, I feared being forgotten in a dark corner of the reading room and ending up locked in for the night, I feared the old librarian with the blue hair and the cat’s-eye glasses and the almost lipless mouth who would pinch the backs of your hands with her long, pale fingers and hiss “Shhhh!” if you forgot where you were and started talking too loudly. And, yes, I feared the library police” (King, 1991, pp. 386-387). Doubtlessly, many authors and members of the public have formative experiences in libraries as children – a Special Library Association survey showed that 62 percent of people formed their image of librarians in childhood, good or bad, and many feel like a school child again when they enter libraries even as adults (Schuman, 1990; Radford, G.P. & Radford, M.L., 2001). The psychological theory of defense mechanisms, discussed here, can also shed light on the development of the librarian stereotype, as well as on its implications for librarians and libraries.

Although the public may accept the stereotype as more or less true, they probably do not spend a lot of time thinking about librarians, nor are librarians as generally as demonized as some other professions. Yet, the vast amount of discussion about this topic in the professional library science literature, [again, see Appendix] and surveys done by the American Library Association showing that “the image of the librarian ranks among the top five concerns of the profession – right up there with library finances, access to information, intellectual freedom, and library personnel resources,” clearly indicate that librarians have long been, and still are, intensely cognizant of, and concerned by, unfortunate stereotypical depictions of themselves (Wallace, 1989). Of course, this image may be no more than another unfortunate librarian stereotype, but it is more likely also, or instead, a truth, albeit an ironic one. Therefore, why librarians care so much is another interesting question with psychological explanations and implications of its own that deserves exploration.

Certainly, the amount of psychic, if not physical, time and energy most people put into their work makes many identify closely with it. More specifically though, perhaps this collective interest is indicative of the long struggle librarians have waged for professional recognition. Or, perhaps now that the profession is being revolutionized by information technology, the traditional image is even more glaringly anachronistic and in need of similar transformation (Adams, 2000; Shaw, 2010). Alternatively, perhaps librarians are as confident as anyone to handle criticism. However, the stereotypes they face, while not as abusive as those of some other professions, or as insidious as racial or religious prejudice, may be unflattering and disparaging enough to awaken shared insecurities about being disrespected, underappreciated, and underpaid and make librarians especially sensitive to demeaning portrayals. (Lawyers, for instance, certainly deal with negative stereotypes, but are, at the same time, considered interesting and important enough to be stars of television shows, rather than librarians who are almost exclusively portrayed as caricatures, for comic relief.) Undoubtedly people in other professions do care about their popular images, but choose to simply get on with their work, rather than belabor the matter. Librarians, on the other hand, after reading popular culture for their collections or for fun, and regularly noticing such portrayals, may feel compelled to respond in writing because of their respect for the written word, or because some need to publish to get tenure. The residual effects of psychological type studies that have been popular with librarians may also make librarians, and others, believe that there is some truth in the stereotype. Or, it may be that, as proud of their work as librarians may be, after a long day of hard work, small rewards, and being subservient to rules and the needs of their collection and their patrons, when off duty, they understandably resent being limited by so many definitions and assumptions, positive or negative, about who they are.

There will always be those who understand and appreciate what librarians and libraries offer to individuals and society, but for the many who have had negative experiences previously, or who just never got in the library habit, the stereotypical image is all they know. Now that economic shortfalls are leading to less financial support for libraries, librarians have even more reason to improve their

image and prove their worth. Therefore, if librarians are going to be stereotyped, as so many studies reveal that they are, then every librarian will confront and have to come to terms with this stereotyping, for their own personal and professional success, as well as for the sake of the profession. Although there are those who say that librarians who participate in this discussion merely perpetuate the problem, rather than focusing on doing and publicizing their work, any long standing, popular stereotype will have real world consequences, affecting not only how a group sees their place in society, but also how others see and treat them (Dyer, 1993; McKinzie, 2007; Wilson, 1982). “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” (Cullen, 2000, p. 42).

Binary Images of Librarians

Troy: Why does being a librarian make her even hotter?” Abed: “They’re keepers of knowledge. She holds the answers to all of our questions. Will you marry me? And, why are there still libraries?”
Community, “21st Century Romanticism”

The library is “the most diabolical ruthless bunch of bureaucrats I’ve ever seen. They’re like a biker gang. But instead of shotguns and crystal meth, they use political savvy...and shushing...The library is the worst group of people ever assembled in history. They’re mean, conniving, rude, and extremely well read, which makes them very dangerous.”

Parks and Recreation, “Ron and Tammy”

At the same time that this vivid, pervasive and persistent traditional stereotype remains problematic for librarians and libraries, the issue is further complicated by other ways that librarians are imagined, each of which has its own particular implications. Seale, for instance, identifies five categories of librarian images, including the old maid, the policeman, parody, the inept and the hero/ine (Seale, 2008). Other studies [see Appendix] uncover more blurred images, and, as discussed here, several distinctly contrasting or binary images to the traditional stereotype of librarians are also identifiable in popular culture.

If libraries intrinsically symbolize order and fear, then any meaning in these contrasting representations may lie only in their departure from the traditional stereotype and discourse; “image busters” including websites such as the Lipstick

Librarian, Anarchist librarian, Belly Dancing Librarian, Modified Librarian, and Library Avengers may merely be ironic riffs on the traditional stereotype (Brewerton, **2001**; Dupre, 2001; Radford, **G.P. & Radford, M.L.**, 2001).

Alternatively, however, these binary images may be the result of a general tendency toward dualism and binary thinking in human nature, or at least western culture (Dickens, 2010). Or, that the explanation for “this oscillation between the overly negative and the overly positive stereotypes” is that “both reflect insecurities in our public and in ourselves.” (Isaacson, 2000, **p. 42**) They may also, or instead, result from splitting, overcompensating or over-identifying, which are some of the defense mechanisms that will be considered here and that may, themselves, contribute to these extreme caricatures.

Again, in **addition** to psychological explanations, there are others, as well. These binary images may be a direct result of the long history and evolving nature of librarianship, during which many things about the profession really have completely changed, such as the primacy of access versus preservation, and the focus on digital information, in addition to books. Libraries became popular during a historical period of modern positivism and so were organized with respect to rationality, predictability, and neutrality. Now, however this postmodern relativity and chaos reign, just as post-structuralism has replaced structuralism (Davis, **2008** ; Radford, **G.P. & Radford, M.L.**, 2005) Librarians even divide themselves into public and technical services, or think of librarianship as an art versus a science, or prefer to use the title information professional instead of librarian. The library science literature also views librarians as helping to guide people through the confusing world of information whereas many people still believe librarians care more about the material, than the people. (Stoddard & Lee, 2005) There are even two alternative themes for librarians to choose from in dealing with the broad conception of their image: one, that there is something different about librarians, and another that they are indistinguishable from others (Stevens, 1988).

However, since each of these binary images now exists in its own right in popular culture, each deserves to be examined in its own right. Over 100 years ago, a librarian noted that, “In fiction we are pictured either as the old fogy bookworm, or

the ideal librarian” (Keller, 1909, p. 297). More recently it was said that, “It is as though the librarian has to be either a prim and proper stereotype or a loose, party loving, butt kicking dynamo. She can be anything but normal” (Duncan, 2004, p. 4). Librarians are sometimes depicted as old fashioned, dreamy, book lovers, and at other times as cool young techie hipsters; sometimes as gatekeepers to knowledge, censoring what others read, and at other times, as facilitators of the free flow of information for all. While they are commonly depicted as unfashionably frumpy, there is also a look known as “librarian chic,” and while librarians are assumed to be quiet by day, there is also a popular idea that they are wild by night. In an alternate binary fantasy, are the rock stars who wanted to be librarians, notably both The Smiths front-man **Steven Morrissey** (<http://www.compsoc.man.ac.uk/~moz/quotes/20quest.htm>) and Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones (http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/music/article7086815.ece). In addition, librarians are sometimes portrayed as mean-spirited and sometimes as sweet, sometimes as omnipotent and/or know-it-alls, and at others as meek and/or know-nothings, sometimes as quiet/shy/introverted, other times as professional/articulate/outgoing.

Consider, first, the traditionally dowdy portrayal of librarians versus the “librarian chic” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMYRRWT3JSU>) or “sexy librarian” image. While librarians are often unkempt – e.g. Israel Armstrong in Ian Samson’s series of Bookmobile Mysteries – it is also true that “shushing” does require the puckering of one’s lips, just like kissing. Advertisers certainly take advantage of both aspects of this image. For instance, there is the Baccardi ad campaign featuring a sexy woman that reads, “Librarian by Day. Baccardi by night” (http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_mistress/40461546/). Or, consider Wanda, a supporting character in the movie *Party Girl*, who is an officious library assistant by day but also dances at wild club parties at night. Such images usually feature a woman – e.g. Showtime’s recent sitcom, *Episodes*, in which a school librarian on an imagined television show is portrayed as stereotypically sexy. However, there is also Casanova, often claimed as a librarian more because of his desirable reputation as a lover, than for

his work in libraries, or the male librarian in the music video for Cascada's *Everytime We Touch*, who starts out with the stereotypical glasses and tie, but then rips them off to dance, running away from the library with the lead singer in the end (http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_mistress/40461546/).

Also diametrically opposed to the traditional stereotype of librarians as conservative guardians of material, keeping it from people (Radford, **M.L. & Radford, G.P.**, 1997; **Radford, G.P. & Radford, M.L.** 2001), is their portrayal as liberal facilitators to the open use and sharing of information. The librarians in *The Name of the Rose* or Giles in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are examples of keeping books hidden away, while Paula Poundstone, a national spokesperson for Friends of Libraries U.S.A. (FOLUSA), notes that, "It's funny that we think of libraries as quiet demure places where we are shushed by dusty, bun-balancing, bespectacled women. The truth is libraries are raucous clubhouses for free speech, controversy and community. Librarians have stood up to the Patriot Act, sat down with noisy toddlers and reached out to illiterate adults. Libraries can never be shushed" (<http://spectrum.ala.org/words-co-chairs/poundstone/>).

Meanwhile, the old school image depicts librarians as only interested in books—e.g., Giles who is a Luddite in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—even while more recent articles tout the rise of a new young techie hipster librarian. “How did such a nerdy profession become cool—aside from the fact that a certain amount of nerdiness is now cool? Many young librarians and library professors said that the work is no longer just about books but also about organizing and connecting people with information, including music and movies.” (Jesella, 2007) While this may merely represent generational differences, rather than stereotyping, (Gordon, 2006) both images do exist today. “Although hip is not an adjective generally associated with librarians, a stack of archivists, publishers, illustrators, librarians, and other bibliophiles...is out to challenge their image as staid” (Shapiro, 2007, **July 5**).

Librarians are even portrayed as superheroes, with almost omnipotent superpowers, sometimes, although the traditional image remains far more meek and powerless. Batgirl, for instance, is a librarian at the Gotham Public Library, who later becomes Oracle, a superhero who still utilizes her information skills. The

Japanese anime series, *Read or Die*, portrays the British Library as an international agency employing superheroes as their secret enforcers in their own British Library Special Operations Division. There is Conan the Librarian from Weird Al Yankovitch's *VHF* and in *The Callahan Touch*, science fiction writer Spider Robinson writes, "Librarians are the secret masters of the universe. They control information. Never piss one off." There are even toys depicting some of these librarians, including the Rex Libris and Warhammer Space Marine characters, both strong superhero type librarians, while the popular Librarian Action Figure represents the traditional stereotype, with shushing as her only "action." Ian Samson, in his Bookmobile Mystery series, writes that, "Librarians possess a kind of occult aura. They could silence people with a glance. At least they did in Israel's fantasies. In Israel's fantasies, librarians were mild-mannered superheroes, with extrasensory perceptions and shape shifting capacities and a highly developed sense of responsibility who demanded respect from everyone they met." Stephen King notes the sinister possibilities of a demonic librarian in *The Library Policeman*. Michael Moore recognizes the strength of real librarians, saying that, "I really didn't realize the librarians were, you know, such a dangerous group. . . You think they're just sitting at the desk, all quiet and everything. They're like plotting the revolution, man. I wouldn't mess with them."

(<http://ilovelibraries.org/loveyourlibrary/quotesaboutlibraries/index.cfm>)

In addition to powerful superhero librarians, there are also know-it-all and know-nothing portrayals of librarians in popular culture (Posner, 2002). These kinds of portrayals have long been the case; librarianship has, "its legendary characters. They are the omniscient old gentlemen who knew the entire contents of every book in their libraries...a reputation for supernatural learning is sometimes as easy to gain as one for ignorance" (Pearson, 1910, 41-2). Both images are alluded to in *The Name of the Rose*, where Malachi, the librarian is said to, "with one glance...penetrate the heart of the person speaking to him, and read his secret thoughts," but that he also, "seemed quite thoughtful, but on the contrary, he was a fool." Similarly, in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, the computerized librarian has many admirable qualities and even helps the main human character save the world, but as we are reminded,

“the only thing he can’t do is think” (Blackmore, 2004).

Binary images of librarians are, not surprisingly, also reflected in binary images of libraries. Some people find them completely wondrous, others completely boring - although all too many probably do not care about them at all. “The sign of the library in popular culture is fluid. It changes with genre, setting and subject.” (Tancheva, 2005) Libraries, themselves, are depicted as mysterious and powerful – e.g., *The Name of the Rose* – or as vital community centers, but also as unused, inessential, outdated money pits. “The opposing ideas of libraries as instruments of social control and as a force for change” is seen in the depiction of the two librarians in Sinclair Lewis’ *Main Street*. (Noble, 2001) Libraries are often the settings for mystery stories because they are seen as places of concealment, where people and facts go to hide, rather than to be discovered, even though librarians increasingly strive for increasing access to information. This could be because “the order that provides access also exists as a barrier because of its complexity.” (Radford and Radford, 2003) Libraries are also traditionally seen as quiet – e.g., as the song, “Marian the Librarian,” in *The Music Man*, says, “For the civilized world accepts as unforgivable sin, Any talking out loud with any librarian,” but they are more often promoted as noisy and bustling now (Walker, 2010).

These images of libraries may derive directly from how people view librarians. If people believe librarians are mousy, powerless, old fashioned, nerdy and frumpy, then they may never recognize and benefit from their true competence. If, on the other hand, they believe that librarians are omniscient or all-powerful, then they will either be disappointed when they encounter a real librarian, or too intimidated to even enter a library in the first place. If librarians believe and accept that librarians are shy and quiet, then they have an excuse to not advocate for their libraries. If they believe that they are risk averse, then they will too easily dismiss new opportunities that might either work or be necessary steps towards future success.

It is in response to the negative aspects of this traditional stereotype, as well as to the binary images identified here, that librarians and the public turn to some common psychological defense mechanisms. Librarians who are insecure about their

profession and the respect it does or not deserve and receive can come to obsess about it, creating a pervasive anxiety throughout the field (Dupre, 2001). “It is understandable that we are afraid and upset when our humanity disappears into a stereotype. We are no longer human to others because they are seeing someone who belongs to them or to the culture at large; when they no longer see us as living, complex beings” (Engle, 2006). As Ian Samson’s librarian character, Israel Armstrong, says, “You know, the longer I spend working as a librarian, the more I’m questioning my own vocation...Not just my vocation, in fact. The very ground of my being.” So, bringing these into consciousness where they can be examined and dealt with, rather than remaining an unconscious, and potentially negative, influence on libraries and librarians - and then identifying some alternative coping mechanisms - is the goal of this chapter.

Defense Mechanisms

But then twitching nervously in the presence of a librarian wasn’t an uncommon response – librarians, like ministers of religion, and poets, and people with serious mental disorders, can make people nervous.

Ian Samson, *Mr. Dixon Disappears*

Israel still found it hard to believe that he’s ended up here in the first place and the longer he stayed the less he believed it, the more he felt like a vestigial presence in his own life a kind of living, breathing Chagall, floating just above and outside the world, staring down at himself as a librarian...

Ian Samson, *The Book Stops Here*

In trying to protect themselves from the more harmful implications of both the traditional and the contrasting, binary librarian stereotypes, librarians may unconsciously employ defense mechanisms. These include reaction formation, overcompensation and over-identification, among others. Stereotyping and binary thinking, or splitting, themselves, are also defense mechanisms that can be employed by creators of popular culture and the general public against anxieties provoked by real or imagined librarians, who some imagine as cranky, officious or otherwise unattractive. However, while this is both understandable and psychologically normal, in that doing so provides people with psychological protections in the short term, it can also undermine the authenticity and self-esteem of librarians (Caputo,

1984, 160-163) as well negatively impact who is attracted to joining the profession (Peresie and Alexander, 2005). This, in turn, can influence the use and support of libraries, given that people are less likely to support libraries if they do not have a positive image of librarians who they can respect and from whom they can expect help. Stereotyping can also unconsciously fuel negative feelings that librarians may have about themselves or their work, leading to the further use of unconscious defense mechanisms that then even further distort who they are and how others perceive them. If librarians, bombarded by these representations, react defensively then this can, in turn, reinforce the public's view of them as caricatures, rather than competent professionals who can and who want to provide them with a valuable service.

The Greek orator, Demosthenes, recognized that the human mind is capable of self-deception in the third century BC. Sigmund Freud introduced the concept of defense mechanisms into psychology over 100 years ago (Cramer, 1998, 889). As first conceived, people employ these defenses to modify, distort or otherwise ward off disturbing thoughts, feelings and perceptions, the recognition of which would create excessive anxiety. *The Diagnostic and Statistical manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) defines defense mechanisms as “automatic psychological processes that protect the individual against anxiety and from the awareness of internal or external dangers or stressors” (American Psychiatric Association [DSM-IV], 2000, 751). They operate by way of inhibition, blocking, distortion and screening (Grzegolowska-Klarawowska, 1990). More recent theories see defenses as useful for maintaining self-esteem and self-coherence (Cramer, 884). Indeed, while defense mechanisms were at first considered pathological, they are now accepted as a part of healthy child development and normal psychological functioning. However, not all unconscious defense mechanisms are positive – some may, in fact, interfere with the functioning of adults in both personal and professional settings.

Responses to the librarian image by librarians include, “anger, frustration, acceptance, rejection, protest, boycott, hurt, humor, and sometimes even delight” (Stevens, 1988). Similarly, many defense mechanisms have been identified since the

idea was first introduced by Sigmund, and later elaborated on by Anna Freud and other psychodynamically oriented theorists (Strickland, 168-170). Among these are regression, repression, reaction formation, isolation, undoing, projection, introjection, turning against the self, reversal, intellectualization, identification, denial, displacement, rationalization, derealization, compensation, fantasy, idealization, substitution, somatization, acting out, sublimation, magical thinking, asceticism, avoidance, negation, splitting, inhibition, pseudoaltruism, as if behavior, clinging, affiliation, anticipation, self-observation, hypochondriasis, autistic fantasy, devaluation, disassociation, passive aggression, and suppression (DSM-IV, 755-757; Plutchik, 2000, 112). Any of these may be, although some are more likely to be, used by librarians and others, especially in response to their stereotypical and binary images.

While the use of some defense mechanisms is necessary to help people survive and thrive, others are more problematic. In order to develop and grow people need to be conscious of those that hold them back or contribute to presenting a negative impression to others. Being overly defensive – i.e., over-identifying with or over-compensating for the librarian stereotype – are examples of this. This is true not only in its extremes, but also along the continuum where most people live their lives, where it is also necessary and healthy to consciously address the defenses people rely on to manage their insecurities, especially when they can negatively impact their self-image and public perception and support. We will focus here on two defenses used by the public and creators of popular culture – stereotyping and splitting – as well as several used by librarians in response to these – including denial, reaction formation, overcompensation, over-identification, devaluation, and grandiosity.

First, *stereotyping* itself is a defense mechanism that the public may turn to because of threats they can feel when confronting librarians. Amy Poehler has interesting things to say about this in relation to the librarian character, Tammy, in *Parks and Recreation*. “The library represents that branch of government that’s like the smart kid—the teacher’s favorite. And the library always wins. They get whatever they want. Everybody loves them—nobody can say anything. People who

work in the library think they are so much better than everyone else. And what's really funny is we've been doing Q&As about our show, and people from local governments have said, 'You guys nailed it about the library.' We were just making it up as a joke on the show, but I guess everyone hates the library"

(<http://www.latimesmagazine.com/2011/01/q-la-amy-poehler.html>). When people have negative experiences with librarians, in libraries, as children or adults, they may seek to reduce their anxiety by simplifying librarians into the belittling stereotype described above. Librarians themselves, in turn, may also stereotype library users and non-users who make them anxious by being difficult or demeaning. As Pearson notes of a patron in 1910, "He has the manners of a rhinoceros and the gentle graciousness of a polar bear." (Pearson, 1910, 81) There are still articles in library literature about problem patrons. The lesson here, however, is that anyone who has had a bad experience in the library as a child can grow up to consciously or unconsciously get back at librarians by perpetuating these images, so librarians should treat everyone with respect, kindness and attention, especially, but not only, children.

Splitting, or binary thinking, like stereotyping, also simplifies the world by allowing people to create dichotomies and categorize experiences into good and bad extremes, allowing them to make simpler choices about how to cope (Kilberg, 2000, 192-200). There is a general tendency for binary thinking in both modern and traditional cultures (Wood and Petriglieri, 2005). Certainly, in popular culture, this is sometimes done solely for dramatic effect; the assumed meek innocence of the librarian stereotype is a perfect foil for hidden depths of evil (Noble, 2001). In *Party Girl*, it is also a plot and character device. "Mary exceeded the terms of the stereotype by being both prim spinster and glamour puss-a prissy miss wielding a date stamp and a savvy, sexy information manager" (Adams, 2000).

Some of the defense mechanisms that librarians may use in response to the traditional stereotype may themselves contribute to the binary or contrasting images. For instance, if they use reaction formation, then they will become the opposite of the stereotype. If they over-identify, then they will become the stereotype, rather than who they really are. Some may rebound between the two extremes. Indeed, the

DSM-IV says that individuals sometimes deal with stress by “compartmentalizing opposite affect states and failing to integrate the positive and negative aspects of the self or others into cohesive images...[As a result they] tend to alternate between polar opposites: exclusively loving, powerful, worthy, nurturant, and kind--or exclusively bad, hateful, angry, destructive, rejecting, or worthless” (DSM-IV, 2000, 757).

It has been noted that, “Librarians tend to have one of two reactions [to the stereotype]: distress or denial” (Engle, 2006). The defense mechanism of *denial* occurs when librarians just shrug or laugh them off these images without understanding the real dangers for librarians and for libraries in not pursuing the psychological reasons for, and implications of, the stereotype(s). Arguing that it is besides the point to even entertain these discussions at all, calling it “an unwholesome curiosity about our image,” or, “mania” that reflects insecurity, and a “neurotic preoccupation with what others think about us” (Mckinzie, 2007) is itself a defense mechanism.

Over-identification can occur in librarians who care so much about their work that they incorporate every aspect of what they think a librarian is, or should be, into their own self-image. “That is his panacea – bibliography...Mr. Dwight is a good man, and a learned librarian, but I cannot, at times, help feeling that he places an undue trust on bibliography as a remedy for the ills that beset mankind. When the Messina earthquake occurred, he was terribly distressed by the suffering, until he had typewritten a bibliography of earthquakes. After he leaned back in his chair, and I verily believe, felt convinced he had taken no small share in improving conditions in Sicily” (Pearson, 1910, 61). This is often the case for stereotypically portrayed characters, as well as every real librarian who looks so much the part that they are identifiable as librarians even outside of their libraries.

Reaction formation, on the other hand, “substitutes feelings and behaviors diametrically opposed to unacceptable ones and usually occurs in conjunction with repression” (DSM- IV, 2000, 756). Those drawn to the profession for good reason, but who are also repelled by the stereotype might find themselves unconsciously defying every part of it, which is not an entirely authentic response, either. It is, for

instance, practical to wear comfortable shoes, and even the youngest librarian will, hopefully, eventually grow old. The image and the concern about the image betrays what is really an unfair “belief that there [is] something distasteful about women growing old, being plain, never marrying” (McReynolds, 1985). Librarians cannot become healthy, productive, and happy if they make decisions based primarily or solely on reactions against stereotypical qualities or parodies. If they reject the stereotype in its entirety then they may also be rejecting positive things like rationality and order.

Overcompensation occurs when librarians take the positive qualities of their archetype, stereotype, or binary images to extremes, or when they seek to be very good in one area because of a perceived deficiency in another. This can be a good thing, if they become better librarians, but it also can have negative personal consequences if they, for instance, spend too much time and energy at work, neglecting other aspects of their lives. Two generally positive depictions of contemporary librarians, Richard Powers’ Jan O’Deigh, in *The Gold Bug Variations* and Elizabeth McCracken’s Peggy Cort in *The Giant’s House* could be considered examples of librarians who do their work so well – which is not a problem in itself – that it may be in order to compensate for their more stilted personal lives. Male librarians, some of whom, in the past, would act especially macho, also represent examples of overcompensation or possibly reaction formation (Sable, 1969; Carmichael, 1992).

Grandiosity is seen in the know-it-all librarian image. Consider any haughty librarian who looks down on patron questions or confusion – e.g. the librarian in *Sophie’s Choice* who causes her to faint when she asks him a question.

Omnipotence, similarly, is seen in the omnipotent image, with characters “acting as if he or she possesses special powers or abilities and is superior to others” (DSM-IV, 2000, 756). Since libraries were probably originally housed in temples, and librarians themselves may have been priests an unconscious superiority may have developed (Davis, 2008, 75). **Devaluation**, on the other hand, is attributing exaggerated negative qualities to self or others, such as the image of librarians as know-nothings or as powerless.

Other defensive responses that have been identified as being used by librarians include *avoidance, repression or suppression, projection, regression* and *rationalization* (Caputo, 1984, 160-163), as well as other ego defensive responses such as *exaggerated consciousness* or *positive chauvinism* (Wilson, 1982, 34). *Passive aggression* may be the librarian response to patrons. Patrons may be using *projection* or *displacement*, accusing librarians of having characteristics they do not like in themselves. *Repression* is also an intrinsic part of the traditional librarian stereotype since even when “expelling feelings from conscious awareness or from conscious associated ideas” (DSM-IV, 2000, 756) librarians may remain unconsciously aware of their image.

Of course, while it should be therapeutic to consider all this, it is also likely that if librarians do nothing else, it will only perpetuate, rather than address and solve, the issues that librarians and libraries face in relation to being stereotyped (Davis, 2008, 74). Therefore, in order to make a difference in the effect that these images have on the public and on librarians, librarians might consider applying the lessons of two of the themes introduced in this chapter – those of binary images and defense mechanisms.

Conclusion

I may not be an explorer, or an adventurer or a treasure-seeker or a gun fighter, Mr. O'Connell. But, I am proud of what I am. I am a librarian!

The Mummy (1999)

To summarize, the traditional librarian stereotype is problematic because it reduces librarians to ineffectual, unimpressive caricatures, inspiring nothing and no one. Their binary images are equally problematic because such extreme distortions offer no relatable or realistic alternatives. It would seem that, “both types must go before the downtrodden, average, ordinary, human librarian can have a fair chance” (Keller, 1909, 297). However, it is not easy to get rid of a stereotype, particularly one with such a long history, based on archetypes that, at least theoretically, serve some universal need.

So, in response to these images, it is understandable that people - both librarians and the public - will turn to unconscious defense mechanisms in order to

help them navigate the anxieties that exist in relation to them. The danger in this, however, is that while defense mechanisms may temporarily soothe, they also distort reality, making it harder to develop the effective coping and problem solving skills (Cramer, 1998, 886-7) that are healthier and more effective responses to threats or anxiety in the real world, such as the very real threats to libraries today.

Two possible ways forward follow from the ideas presented here. First, is for librarians to consciously use more “mature” defense mechanisms – such as humor, intellectualization, and identification - to face these images (Valliant, 1977). Those with self-knowledge, secure and content with who they are, can always laugh or editorialize. The other choice, and these are not mutually exclusive, is to analyze the binary images of librarians, rather than just the traditional stereotype, so that librarians can locate themselves somewhere along each continuum and make meaningful choices about who they are, gaining self-confidence, and presenting this to the world.

Using **humor**, “the individual deals with emotional conflict or external stressors by emphasizing the amusing or ironic aspects of the conflict or stressor” (DSM-IV, 2000, 755). Librarians are therefore advised by some to treat any stereotyping as a joke (Stevens, 1988). Self parody - playing with perceptions of how others see you - is also a critical phase of assimilation that usually results in re-emerging with greater strength (Stout, 2004). Once librarians accept that the traditional stereotype (i.e., glasses, sensible shoes, hair in a bun, flowery cardigan sweater, etc.) is somewhat humorous, they can move on, modeling pride and a more practical focus on their work (Dupre, 2001). When something strikes one as funny, it is cathartic to both enjoy that and recognize the meaning and possible satirical truths within. Even when librarian stereotyping is of questionable humor, and meant unironically, it can make librarians, as well as the public, question the status quo and work to improve things, rather than just accepting the way things are and have always been done.

As for **intellectualization**, it is healthy to study and analyze any issue honestly, openly and rationally. Of course, this is different from making up excuses and rationalizations, which only obscures issues. It also differs from over-

intellectualization, which often focuses on only one aspect or theory, ignoring all others. Although there is a danger that making anything more conscious has the potential to make people more self-conscious, rather than self-confident, this can be mitigated by also addressing the related psychological components of any issue. Therefore, librarians need to examine and confront their feelings about being stereotyped and whether they are unconsciously relying on defense mechanisms in an effort to avoid or reduce the anxiety that comes with being forever typecast. Certainly people should not write more about the image of librarians “unless they have something to say that will be helpful rather than hurtful” (Wilson, 1982), but many of the websites, articles, presentations, letters to the editor and books about the image of librarians really do offer positive examples of using intellectualization as a healthy defense.

Another healthy defense mechanism that librarians can use to improve their self-image and popular image is **identification**. It is healthy and normal for both children and adults to look at others and choose positive qualities to emulate and integrate into themselves. So, although “even a positive stereotype robs the object of individuality” (Peresie and Alexander, 2005), positive and relatable aspects of these images can be identified and emulated. This is not over-identification, as described above, but rather a conscious and considered embrace of those aspects of the archetypes, binary images and even the traditional stereotype that resonate, discarding the rest, except to explore exactly why and how they affect librarians and libraries, today.

Librarians and the public need a positive image of librarians, one that they can identify with and aspire to, one that recognizes their proud history of scholarship, service and opportunities, especially for women (McReynolds, 1985), and one that sets them apart in a positive way. If their image “communicate[s] a sense of professional competence then we’d be foolish not to take advantage of the situation” (Thomas, 2007). For instance, some librarians might wear the comfortable clothing, or the cats-eye glasses, either ironically or otherwise, in a conscious attempt to remember and champion the hard working women of library history

(Adams, 2000). Mary, in the movie *Party Girl*, after finding that she likes library work, starts to dress in homage to the stereotype, although she also maintains her own identity as well, making her ensembles funky and her skirts short.

As librarians find positive aspects of their image to identify with, others will see these more clearly, as well. This is important not only for the psychological health of librarians; it also affects the success and health of libraries, something relevant to librarians, library users and society, in general. For instance, academic librarians can seek to become librarian-scholars (Bales, 2009) and all librarians can focus on teaching more and being more visible, becoming wise mentors to anyone in need of the guidance that information and knowledge offer.

People who are afraid of librarians will not use the library. Indeed, there are still library users who think of the librarian as, “a modern dragon” (Pearson, 1910) focused solely on enforcing strict and incomprehensible rules. People who think libraries are boring or just not for them will never know all there is in libraries for everyone. Librarians have been ranked towards the bottom of occupational status surveys, but those who interact with them more do have a better image of them (Harris and Sue Chan, 1988). The NPR Pop Culture blogger and radio host, Linda Holmes, found it exciting and revelatory when she stopped in her local library, saying that, “I have always associated the library with school and homework and (the horror) being quiet, not necessarily with fun,” and that she is “speaking of those — whose numbers are strangely large — who, like me, just kinda ... stopped thinking about public libraries at some point”

(<http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2011/04/11/135314291/the-library-card-as-a-pop-culture-fiends-ticket-to-geek-paradise>). So, what does this mean for the people who do not use libraries and only have the stereotype to go on? This is part of a larger issue about what libraries and librarians should be doing in their communities, but no matter how libraries evolve, a focus on knowledge and wisdom is certainly something that librarians should maintain and nurture (Leeder, 2010).

Some might “diagnose” or argue that identification is merely rationalization or a Panglossian way to keep librarians down (Kay, et al, 2007). However, if librarians were to lose the traditional stereotype completely, then they would also

lose parts of their professional distinguishability (Stevens, 1988). They would lose the readymade, identifiable and fun branding opportunity of, “transforming the caricature into a trademark” (Thomas, 2007), although because stereotyping is so intractable, there is little danger of this. “To lose an issue that for so long has furnished our profession with so much anger, concern, enjoyment, and laughter especially if it should come about as a result of the loss of identity threatened by the new stereotype truly would be a shame” (Stevens, 1988), since “there are few professions that our society has deigned to honor with the creation of such a strong stereotype – one that became incorporated into popular culture” (Stevens, 2001).

The other way that librarians can move forward is to claim themselves as capable professionals and fully realized human beings, not merely funny or ineffective stereotypical images; to first find out who they each are as individuals and then bring that to their work as librarians. The binary images of librarians - now so common that they are competing with the traditional stereotype for prominence - provide the outliers to do so. However, librarians need not identify with either extreme of any of these images; instead, they need to find their own place along each continuum, being true to themselves and the current needs of the profession. This will let them be more authentic and self-actualized, so that they can present themselves as real people to the public. The public, in turn, facing real librarians, can then see these images for what they are, caricatures that stretch the truth to make dramatic or comedic points, rather than as anything to either fear or demean. Every real librarian will find something to identify with and something to be repelled at in these images. The goal is to understand their power and integrate them into who they are so that they can use their strengths to advance the work of libraries.

Jung recognizes regressive - or defensive – and progressive – or developmental – functions of the archetypal human propensity to think in polarizing or binary ways. “The ego maintains its integrity only if it does not identify with one of the opposites and if it is understand how to hold the balance between them. This is only possible if one remains conscious of both at once.” What is always needed is to find a third mediating position that transcends binary polarities, such as thesis and antithesis or id and superego (Wood and Petriglieri, 2005). The goal of post-structural criticism, as

well as therapy, is the deconstruction and/or integration of such binary opposites into a more complete and balanced understanding. The 2001 Honda Accord advertisement could be understood as an example of binary stereotyping, but it could also be an example of such integration. “The automotive equivalent of a really hot librarian. Good looking, yet intelligent. Fun, yet sophisticated”

(http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_mistress/32232551/). As librarians present a more fully realized image of what they do, it can influence public support for libraries because people will come to recognize them, not as caricatures, but as professionals serving a public need and worthy of respecting, supporting and getting to know.

Rather than relying on unconscious defense mechanisms to over-identify with, overcompensate for, or engage in reaction formation against, librarians should consciously continue to do their work, while letting others know who they are and what they are doing. Whether they are eccentric characters or regular people who represent every personality type and interest and look just like everyone else, librarians should be authentic, well-rounded individuals, with self-knowledge, and even contradictions. Although we decry hypocrisy, real people do have contradictions and are capable of surprises, growth and admitting even their inconsistencies while working to understand and reconcile them. If librarians consciously understand the history and symbolism of their image(s) it can help them claim and choose where on each continuum they are most comfortable and real.

As John Cotton Dana advised librarians, over a century ago: “To the librarian himself one may say: Be punctual; be attentive; help develop enthusiasm in your assistants; be neat and consistent in your manner. Be careful in your contracts; be square with your board; be concise and technical; be accurate; be courageous and self-reliant; be careful about acknowledgments; be not worshipful of your work; be careful of your health. Last of all, be yourself” (Dana, 1903). Or, first of all, be yourself, whether this includes aspects of the archetypes, stereotype, binary images, or something else entirely.

Only if librarians, the public they serve and want to serve, and the funders who financially support them are honest about what they need, and what they can do, will libraries be able to continue to provide the services that have contributed so much to

civilization, and to so many individuals, thus far. If we want libraries to survive - because it is meaningful and useful to interact with both information and people in inspiring and safe spaces - and we want to live in a society with librarians - because they work to preserve the integrity of information and make meaningful and positive differences in our communities - then librarians must, first of all, be themselves.

APPENDIX

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