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Gender issues in the workplace: Male librarians tell their side

BY JAMES V. CARMICHAEL, JR.

The road to equity is still long, says a library educator who asked males how their gender has affected their careers.

While a substantial body of literature relating to women's issues has appeared since the 1960s, very few researchers have attempted to summarize the male point of view about the impact of gender issues on librarianship. Such issues need to be aired openly in the profession, as the recent debate over *American Libraries'* July/August 1992 cover photo of gay librarians (see "Reader Forum," Sept. 1992, p. 625; Oct. 1992, p. 738-740; Nov. 1992, p. 840-844) makes abundantly clear.

Whether or not librarians should or should not take a stand on social issues, they certainly have an obligation to recognize problems where they exist. Male or female, gay or straight, administrator or line worker, librarians have much to discuss about gender issues before they will be ready for the social order of the twenty-first century.

To capture male sentiments about gender issues, I conducted a national survey in early October 1991 of randomly selected male librarians listed in the *1990-1991 ALA Membership Directory*. Just two weeks after the survey was mailed, the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings began, and the following week Sen. Edward M. Kennedy publicly apologized for past sexual misconduct as the William Kennedy

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Smith rape trial began. These highly publicized events may account for the unusually high response rate of 73% (482 usable responses), within which I found ample proof of how complex and contradictory male librarians' attitudes are towards gender parity. Apparently men, too, need to be liberated.

I hope that the following extracts from survey responses will serve more as stimuli to holistic thinking about gender issues than mere fodder for inflammatory debate. Respondents represent all types of libraries, specialties, and levels of administrative experience; library school students, library vendors, and library trustees without library work experience were excluded from the final sample.

Men's work

A surprisingly large number of respondents complained about the nature of tasks

cleaning up vomit . . . or enforcing library policy on unruly teens. Often it's not even something that is stated. I feel that as a man I 'should' do [what] a woman in my position would have an 'underling' do."

"Virtually every assistant librarian I've known is female. The male librarians I know are directors."

"In some circumstances, decisions regarding work role assignments are based on gender, but more often on personality."

"I have seen men and women exchange responsibilities without affecting efficiency. In academic libraries a broad education is the more important factor."

"Generally, women are more empathetic than men; working with people comes perhaps more easily. This should enhance their abilities in administrative positions, other abilities being equal."

"Men are assumed to be more computer competent."

The profession still has a long way to go before achieving anything like parity, which will only occur when all librarians learn to listen to each other.

they felt implicitly expected to perform because they are male—lifting and moving heavy objects being the most frequent complaint. Conversely, one librarian objected to being excluded from interior decorating decisions. These seemingly petty criticisms are not trivial—if by gender parity we mean the cessation of distinctions, even minor ones, between men and women in the workplace.

When one considers the concentration of men and women in various library specialties, the situation becomes more serious. While some men still harbor prejudice against women as managers, others seem relatively open-minded. Gender problems operate in both directions, however; for instance, several respondents' comments indicate that male children's librarians have a particularly tough go of it.

"Being one of three male librarians on a staff of 30+, I'm often called upon to do 'scut jobs.' I get the fun of busting a gut moving eight tables across the library,

"Men seem to be pushed into the lime-light quicker/advanced faster."

"More men [are] in administration. Very few are children's librarians."

"Women seem to prefer schools and technical services—functional specialties—it's choice."

"Generally speaking, men and women do the same work in librarianship except at the support service level, where they are entirely women in my experience."

"It is expected that you [males] take on night and weekend work because 'security' or 'personal safety' is automatically assumed to be 'no problem.' You also get more long-term 'project work' because you don't have 'child-care' concerns. You get more 'homework.'"

"When I was in children's work, I found that some older women particularly were very uncomfortable with having a man in the children's department. When the 'don't talk to strangers' hysteria started, it became difficult for some children to ap-

proach me—strangers were universally seen as men.”

What is this thing called “gay”?

Like men in other “feminine” or “feminized” professions (i.e., nursing, social work, and teaching), the male librarians in this sample seem to believe that there is a greater proportion of gay men in the profession than in society at large. Only 9% of the sample, however, identified themselves as gay, a proportion that approximates the 8% figure still accepted by the Kinsey Institute as representing the “best estimates available” of the proportion of men who have engaged in exclusively homosexual relationships for at least three years.

In other words, there is reason to doubt that there are any more gay men in the library profession than in the population at large. The fact that male librarians seem convinced otherwise may perhaps reflect their general feelings of insecurity about societal perceptions of librarians as “marginal.” Asked to identify male librarian stereotypes from a checklist, over 81% of all respondents identified “effeminate (probably gay)”;

all others on the checklist by at least 30 percentage points.

Ironically, the plethora of image literature in librarianship has yet to deal with a male librarian stereotype distinct from the female stereotype—one, at least, which bears the negative import of its female counterpart. Only slightly over 32% of respondents believe that the technological revolution in librarianship has altered this stereotype to any measurable degree. Apparently, male librarians, like male nurses, have a fear of being perceived as homosexual, and this fear arises in part from belonging to a feminized profession. These findings provide the framework for the many comments received about gay librarians, some from gay librarians themselves:

“The disproportionate number of gay males in the profession is a fact, but I don’t think the average Joe thinks that a male librarian is probably gay in the way he might a hairdresser or decorator.”

“Among male librarians that I have known, I have noticed ridicule of a male librarian considered to be effeminate. From my reading about research on homosexuality, it seems that there is considerable evi-

dence that gay men as children seem to exhibit more gender-atypical behavior. If this is the case, it would stand to reason that a profession like librarianship, representing roles more typically associated with females, would attract them.”

“In the academic environment, a fairly large number of male faculty perceive all male librarians as gay.”

“Entering the library profession I had no idea of the percentage of gays in the profession and the stereotype attached to the profession. I probably could not have entered the profession if I had known this. I get tired of being assumed to be gay because I work in a library . . . by the gay community as well as others. If this does not change I will be changing professions eventually.”

“I looked for a positive view/stereotype for gay men as librarians. I wish there were—I would like the profession to have role models in openly professional gay men to break many of the stereotypes. Having the first gay/lesbian task force in any professional organization, it boggles my mind to think how little has been done to change the stereotypes or misperceptions of gay men.”

So, now what?

In late January, *AL* assembled via fax a “reactor panel” of three female library leaders to share their thoughts about James Carmichael’s survey results. Both Suzanne Hildenbrand (associate professor at SUNY/Buffalo library school) and Kathleen de la Peña McCook (library school director at the University of South Florida/Tampa) are known for their research on equity issues. Like thousands of other library officials, Monterey County (Calif.) Librarian Dallas Shaffer manages a 15-branch rural system amid the gender bind’s day-to-day fallout.

AL: More than 20 years after the formation of ALA’s Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship (COSWL), 45% of Carmichael’s respondents denied that men have an advantage over women in professional advancement. How far has the profession come in the struggle for gender parity? Where do we go from here?

Hildenbrand: The persistence, or resurgence, of misogyny, bigotry, and stereotyping is a major problem. As the economy has soured and the recovery appears to be primarily benefitting investors, this is re-

ally not surprising. Greater competition for scarce jobs has turned those accustomed to skin and gender privilege more openly mean-spirited.

A big part of that mean-spiritedness is the willful misunderstanding of affirmative action, which holds out the promise (often unfulfilled) of offering some real competition to the white males who dominate in the profession. Some of them act as if this is an injustice, and quickly point to dreadful women directors. What about the dreadful men directors who maintained their positions for years in the “good old days”? Affirmative action means fewer dreadful directors.

Then, there is the frequent appearance of a double standard—those eager to reveal that it was a woman who refused to consider women for bookmobile service or the woman administrator who put her hand on the male employee’s thigh. No kidding. Did these guys think we are all pure, angelic creatures? Clearly, rules, policies, and supervision of all are needed; the only standard for a position should be relevant preparation and ability.

McCook: The demographics of occupational entry indicate that the mix of students entering the profession has changed little over the past 20 years. Overall, women

account for 75% and men 25% of new entrants. Given these figures, administrative posts of high visibility (i.e., ARL libraries, large public libraries) ought to reflect the same ratio.

A 1983 COSWL study demonstrated that women and men who exhibit similar behaviors in terms of mobility, publication activity, and professional involvement still achieve different levels of administrative success. Efforts of COSWL to isolate variables and offer guidance have illuminated those aspects of career behavior that lead to advancement.

As these variables are understood, there may be a perception that women have gained some advantage, but it is simply that more women understand the rules of the game and there is more competition for men in the profession. Twenty years ago, most men just had to show up. A replication of the COSWL study would provide longitudinal verification of these perceptions.

Shaffer: I would like to dismiss this article as the whining of a few unhappy people, but the number of respondents—plus my quick-and-dirty interview of three male colleagues—indicates that attention needs to be paid to the responses. Bitterness festers in dark places.

My personal experience in career ad-

"While I happen to be straight, I also see the tide turning against gay men as well. In order for gay men to be considered 'one of the girls,' they have to be nonthreatening caricatures of gay men who do not aspire to strong supervisory roles over women."

"In many ways I see my becoming a librarian as a logical extension of my coming out as a gay man . . . I have found librarianship to be exceptionally welcoming of gay men. It is a refuge from the generally unpleasant homophobic work world."

"Librarians, for instance in ALA, seem to have an active gay and lesbian contingent, which appears to be threatened by male librarians. In contrast, there seems to be no comparable group among school teachers. The highly visible gay group lends itself to a library stereotype."

"Male librarians suffer from the poor image of librarians as a whole—the public stereotype of a female librarian as a sexless female with a bun saying 'Shh!'"

Women as administrators

Asked whether they thought of the profession as predominantly female, 30% of

respondents said that they did not. Forty-five percent denied that men have an advantage in advancement (although over 53% of the sampled male librarians were in administration), and 51% refuted the idea that the scarcity of males improves their chances for promotion. Only 10% thought that being a man hindered them professionally, although the open-ended comments that followed these categorical questions often contradicted those responses, some of which revealed considerable bitterness.

"From my own experience in academic library administration I have observed that female administrators are often more aggressive than their male counterparts; however that is not to say that males are unambitious or powerless. Perhaps the women have been forced to become more aggressive to be heard (or share that attitude, at any rate). Still, I don't feel that there is any difference in effect over the long run—we simply have different ways of doing things at times."

"Affirmative action has made it difficult for qualified males to get positions."

"Affirmative action and 'selective certi-

fication' means that my advancement was most fortunate."

"Tenure, promotion, and work assignments have become increasingly slanted against straight men in particular, and against all men in general, within librarianship. There is an increasing sense that women can underachieve . . . But this is supposed to be glossed over because they (women) are: more 'nurturing,' 'supportive,' 'sensitive' (these qualities are now preferred over 'productive,' 'capable,' 'competitive,' 'insightful,' 'enterprising,' etc.) . . . The message 'EO/AA. Women and minorities are particularly encouraged to apply' has a not-so-subtle under-text: 'Get lost, capable white man! Die! So we can blame you for all our ills!'"

"[Women's] actual output is ignored in favor of their value as 'role models.' Hey? Can I become an 'incest survivor?'"

Sexual harassment and discrimination

Only 18% of respondents reported experiences of sexual discrimination and sexual harassment. Questions about sexual harassment, variously interpreted by the respondents, revealed a surprising sensitiv-

vancement confirms the statistics that men rise farther, faster. How many men do you know that started their library careers as directors? How many women? However, one of my colleagues reports that three women have told him they would not hire a male manager due to past discrimination against women.

I think some of the anger stems from the contraction of opportunities resulting from the economic downturn, combined with the flattening of the traditional hierarchical management pyramids and the oh-so-human desire to find a scapegoat.

AL: Survey respondents express a sense of sex-role victimization in the workplace. How can libraries be made a more hospitable workplace for both sexes?

Hildenbrand: An interesting picture of the daily life of the so-called professional librarian comes through: moving heavy furniture, doing "dirty work," and cleaning up vomit! Do these libraries have custodial staff? Isn't *that* the issue?

Once again, it seems to me that the profession's lack of funds promotes grudges. Supervisors have a real responsibility to 1) work for adequate staffing at all levels and 2) parcel out equitably the onerous tasks that can't be avoided. It must be

remembered that women often have the most emotionally draining and wrenching jobs due to their supposed nurturing or maternal powers.

Homophobia is an issue that is rarely addressed in our professional literature. That is really too bad. Clearly it must be faced more honestly than it has been. Since literary and historical scholarship on gay and lesbian issues is flourishing today and setting very high standards, perhaps we can look for some work in librarianship soon. The low marriage rate among both women and men librarians and the early formation of ALA's Gay and Lesbian Task Force are suggestive data, but do not really tell us much.

McCook: In any organization, men and women sometimes assume stereotyped roles. Physical size has a bit to do with this, as well as early upbringing. Even today, young adult males tend to do yardwork and young females provide childcare. Change needs to start in the streets—with girls mowing and raking and boys babysitting.

Men annoyed with heavy work might bring OSHA regulations to their employers' attention. In return, it's probably high time that female employees no longer organize receptions or put up holiday decorations. The bottom line is that most

organizations have some internal demands not unlike the average household, such as moving furniture or planning parties. So why not bring these matters up at staff meetings and reverse roles?

Sexual harassment continues to be a serious issue for women and men. Ending it requires constant oversight, open discussion, and examination of attitudes. We have to point out to each other that one-on-one we want to be treated as equal intellectual partners working toward common goals. It's a long long road but by keeping issues on the table, we make small gains on a daily basis.

Shaffer: I was struck by the feelings expressed of having to do the "dirty" work, such as cleaning up vomit. What about making the coffee and taking care of the vomiting child? With my proclivities, that means joining in. My male colleagues confirmed resentment for being asked to do the "dirty" work. Conclusion: Sexual stereotyping does exist in our less-than-perfect world.

However, in my work experience all staff are expected to do equal shares of night, weekend, and discipline duty. And as a leader, I have always felt uncomfortable asking others to do the "scut" work, regardless of sex.

One-seventh of the respondents reported

ity to affront; several, for example, felt excluded from "girl talk" at coffee break. Some recounted unexpectedly painful experiences. There were 57 reported cases of sexual harassment by females and 11 cases of male harassment. Thirty-one respondents reported incidents of both male and female harassment.

"The personnel officer knows that it is patronizing to put her hand on my knee—so she has."

"Former supervisor required 'deviant' and disgusting behavior [from me] to keep my job."

"Only that I've been volunteered for tasks in order to show the public that there's a male librarian."

"You get hit on at professional meetings by gay men."

"I wish! I should be so lucky!"

"A trustee once 'hit' on me prior to my interview between the airport and the library."

"Female librarians have double standards. Comments about men and male stereotypes are made freely in male presence. The same comments made by men about women would bring accusations of sexual harassment."

"Only by innuendo that my appointment was aided by my being male."

"The Board of Control President stated that no male directors will ever be hired for this county as long as she is a board member."

"The harassment I feel often takes the guise of a general lack of humor in much of the academic workplace—so there is in

place a tension that does affect the ability [for men and women] to work together in a relaxed environment."

"The beauty of the sexual harassment racket is that it is aimed exclusively at men . . . in that the offense is not explicitly defined, and a loose definition fits into the designs of the professional victimologists . . . All flirtation, when you remove the adventitious, has an element of sexual harassment at its core for the simple reason that sex involves, for one reason or another, an impulse to domination. Women, however, are elusive, circuitous, and conservative. They never make advances until they are sure advances have been made."

"Why is there an ALA Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship, but none on the status of men in librarianship, especially when men are in the minority?"

"A restroom on a floor where men work [was] made 'women only' when others are unisex. Sometimes it's hard to distinguish discrimination from incompetency in a director."

"Missed on directorship because they had decided to hire a woman. This from two women involved in the search who thought the woman was the wrong choice."

"I think that there are now so many models of women librarians in the very highest positions that it is difficult to prove a case for gender discrimination in hiring and promotion. I do think the average man who enters the profession is more devoted to career advancement and willing to accept the sacrifices (like relocation) than the average woman (maybe that's a stereotype!)."

"Have noticed some male directors only promote males. Have seen at least one male who was incapable of working for a woman and never got assignments."

"Males prefer to employ females. Females want to help other females advance."

"Female director antigay/thought gays 'weak.'"

Escaping the gender bind

Gender denial, gender backlash, and gender privilege still affect the library profession to a degree that might surprise those who think of the women's movement as a historical fact rather than as a living force for social change. The tone and substance of some of the respondents' remarks indicate that male librarians need to catch up on the history and current status of women in librarianship. True, the professional climate for female librarians has improved markedly in the past two decades. Still, the profession has a long way to go before achieving anything like parity, which will only occur when all librarians learn to listen to each other and be open to changing their attitudes.

The equation for gender parity can never be reduced to mere statistics, any more than the sexual preference of professionals can be neatly categorized solely by virtue of their sex and choice of vocation. Were the full story told, all parties might realize that the "gender bind" is an impersonal force, carrying in its wake people of both sexes and all races and sexual persuasions. The ultimate beneficiary of liberation from that bind will be the human race. □

incidents of sexual harassment; in the U.S. one-fourth of women report rapes or sexual molestation. My branch used to be called Petticoat Junction because I hired a female maintenance mechanic. Gender harassment is endemic in our society.

The stereotype of the effeminate male librarian certainly does exist; one of my colleagues admits to emphasizing to the outside world the word "administrator" in his title. On the other hand, women contend daily with the images of battle-ax or little old lady with a bun. It is amazing how stereotypes thrive in the face of contradictory reality.

AL: How can librarians move beyond the societal "blame game" trend in trying to escape what Carmichael calls the "gender bind"?

Hildenbrand: What can be done about

this incredible state of affairs? More of what we have been doing. COSWL and the Feminist Task Force need to increase their efforts, and more research on women, men, and gender issues in the profession is needed.

It's naive to think that COSWL has failed or not done the right things—the task has gotten much more difficult. False issues such as "political correctness" have confused thinking on the major issues.

McCook: This article and the items documented by COSWL in its ongoing bibliographic projects raise our intellectual awareness of these issues. Understanding problems is the first step to solving them. Broad general discussion illuminates issues that are difficult to articulate. We have a common goal (excellent library service) and day-to-day gender binds that get in the way of this goal need

to be explored so they do not erode our performance.

Shaffer: James Carmichael's survey demonstrates that many men perceive a discriminatory reality that challenges all of us once again to examine our assumptions and actions.

For instance, I heard the pain of the male children's librarians—though once again my experience tells me it is not universal. My first professional job was under the warm mentorship of a marvelous male children's librarian. I currently work with another, now a senior manager, who reported many positive responses to his role—and the benefit of quick access to a rest room at meetings of children's librarians.

Incidentally, he recently took several months of parental leave and continues to adjust his schedule to meet both childcare and work demands.