"Ask a Professional - Ask a Librarian": Librarianship and the chronic struggle for

professional status

Mattea A. Garcia

Rollins College

Joshua B. Barbour

University of Texas at Austin

Mattea A. Garcia, PhD, Assistant Professor, Rollins College, mgarcia@rollins.edu;

Joshua B. Barbour, PhD, Assistant Professor, University of Texas at Austin,

barbourjosh@utexas.edu

Address correspondence to Mattea A. Garcia, Department of Communication, Rollins

College, 1000 Holt Avenue – 2777, Winter Park, FL 32789 E-mail: mgarcia@rollins.edu

Author Short Bios

Mattea A. Garcia (Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at Rollins College, USA. Her research focuses on professional identity, institutional theory, and workplace bullying.

Joshua B. Barbour (Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin, USA. He studies macromorphic communication, the institutional moorings of communication and organizing and practitioners' strategic communicative efforts to navigate those structures.

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Abstract

Professionalizing occupations strive to convince the public, policy makers, and each other of their distinctiveness and legitimacy. Efforts to maintain professional status are a key facet of professional identity negotiation, which is complicated by technological, political, and economic threats. This study investigated librarians' struggle to defend the legitimacy of their profession while facing threats to their status and values. Drawing on interviews (N=32) and observations of librarians from multiple work sites, this study provides evidence for conceptualizing professionalization as an ongoing, macrosocial, communicative process through which individuals attempt to define and defend the profession. The findings contribute to institutional and communication theory of professional identity negotiation, offering the insight that the discursive resources provided by the profession shape professionals' efforts to resist stigma facing the profession and, yet, those same professional discursive resources can make their navigation of material and discursive threats to the profession more difficult.

Keywords: librarians, professions, professionalization, occupations, identity, stigma

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Occupational groups seek the legitimacy and prestige that come with professional status. Wilensky (1964) argued that not every occupation can achieve that status, but that they "engage in a heroic struggle" to do so (p. 137). As institutionalized occupations, professions typically confer workers autonomy, control over the terms of labor, status, economic rewards, the advocacy of professional associations, and responsibilities and rights per standards for professional conduct and legal frameworks (Abbott, 1988; Scott, 2008). Professions and professionals merit study because of the important work they do for their patients, clients, and constituencies (Barbour & Lammers, 2015; Lammers & Garcia, 2009). Professionals "play an increasingly important role in contemporary knowledge-intensive societies, bringing their expert knowledge and skills to bear in a widening variety of economic and social settings" (Brock, Leblebici, & Muzio, 2014, p. 1). As complex social problems increasingly call for collaboration among different domains of expertise, professional identity dynamics can have important effects on efforts to address them.

Although conceptualizing professions as institutionalized occupations may, at face value, suggest a model of professions and professional identity as established and enduring, professions occupy contested societal terrain (Ashcraft, 2013; Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). Professional identity is fragmented and intertwined with issues of power, control, and resistance (Meisenbach, 2008), and professionals and professions must respond to material and discursive changes and challenges (e.g., Ashcraft, 2005; Miller 1998; Real & Putnam, 2005). Professional identity can buffer against the difficulties of work (Lammers, Atouba, & Carlson, 2013), but at the same

time, professionals, like workers in general, increasingly face expectations that they will cultivate success and stability in career to cope with unstable workplaces (Meisenbach, 2008).

This study focuses on librarians, members of a profession struggling to protect and improve its image and status (Kniffel, 2004; Seminelli, 2016). Librarians can trace their roots to Eratosthenes of Alexandria, and yet, this long history notwithstanding, modern librarians often feel "invisible, overlooked, and underestimated" (Preer, 2006, p. 489). Librarians face shrinking budgets, a shifting scope of work, and massive changes in the technologies of their work (Choi & Rasmussen, 2009; LeMaistre, Embry, Van Zandt, & Bailey, 2012). In line with communication research on professional identity, we conceive of librarians' professionalization as an ongoing, sustained defense of the legitimacy of their profession and their professional identities (Ashcraft, Muhr, Rennstam, Sullivan, 2012; Meisenbach, 2008). Informed by institutional and communicative approaches to professional identity negotiation, this study investigated this struggle in librarians' daily work and their accounts of that work through interviews of thirty-two librarians working in ten sites, including academic, municipal, and hospital libraries, and observations mainly at one municipal and one academic library. The findings confirm that in the face of challenges to the profession, librarians seek to define the boundaries of membership and work activities. The findings extend theory of professional identity negotiation by revealing librarians' communicative strategies for defending these boundaries in their daily work and how the very tenets of the profession constrained their efforts to do so.

Professions and Professionalization

Professions and professionals undertake efforts to preserve and protect the legitimacy and social status of the profession (Meisenbach, 2008), control who is included and excluded from the profession (Ashcraft et al., 2012), and sell their expertise as distinctive and valuable (Treem,

2016). Professions are institutionalized occupations in the sense that they operate as an extra organizational influence, transcending any particular organization (Barbour & Lammers, 2015; Lammers & Garcia, 2014). Professionalization, a form of institutionalization, is "the collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work," (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 152), and sociological approaches to the professions have typically focused on education and professional associations as the sites of that struggle (or contrasts between sociological and communication approaches to professions in Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007; Treem, 2012).

Professionalization, as a category of occupational identity work, also involves the negotiation of the broader discourses associated with the profession as well as the specific practices associated with a domain of work (Ashcraft, 2007; Meisenbach, 2008). Professionalization may be understood not just as a linear process of transformation wherein occupations become and are thus ever professions, but also as an ongoing process of sustenance and restoration, branding and rebranding (Ashcraft et al., 2012). Meisenbach (2008) defined occupational identity as the "shifting, material, and discursive framing of image and practices associated with a particular type of work" (p. 263)," and as a specific sort of occupational identity, professional identity is used here to call attention to the particular importance of the institutional moorings of local communicative and organizational phenomena involved in making sense of work and self (Lammers & Garcia, 2014). Through communication, professionals defend their work choices, protect their professional status, and navigate the meaning of profession as it relates to their own self-concepts.

Identities serve as "important resources in the formation of personal notions of self" (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008, p. 6). Identity helps us make decisions about how we

should behave and communicate and composes a "set of rules and resources that function as an anchor for who we are" (Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998, p. 303). The profession provides a portable identity (Russo, 1998; Meisenbach, 2008) and concomitant values and beliefs (Barbour & Lammers, 2015). Professionals derive a sense of self from the profession and navigate their work environments using professional norms and values as a guide (Barbour & Lammers, 2015; Lammers and Garcia, 2009). Workers tap into external, discursive resources associated with the profession as they justify choices and establish and maintain professional status (Kuhn, 2009).

To create, sustain, and manage their professional identities, professionals engage in a variety of communicative activities. For example, Real and Putnam's (2005) study of pilots revealed communicative tactics used to defend the profession as "unique and irreplaceable" (p. 103). For the pilots, "the use of metaphors and discursive strategies," was a powerful means of protecting professional status. Ashcraft (2005) studied pilots' use of "narratives of masculinity" (p. 69) as they attempted to protect the professions' prestige from threat and decline. Meisenbach (2008) documented fundraisers' use of discursive framings for their work to accommodate and resist stigmatizing conceptions of their work. A key question at the edge of this literature is how the particular beliefs core to the broader professional identity enable and constrain the professionalizing project (Ashcraft, et al., 2012).

In vying for status, professionals must be able to "persuade the public of the mystery of the craft" (Wilensky, 1964, p. 137). Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) conceptualized "professionalization as a fundamentally rhetorical process because the identity and status of any job is not given or determined but is rather a precarious, contested formation constantly negotiated through discursive activity" (pp. 164-165). As professionals communicate to professionalize, they make sense of their work life and articulate their experiences. The labels

profession and *professional* have implications for work life and individuals' identities. As with other institutions, professions provide vocabularies and scripts for individuals to use at work (Barbour, 2010; Loewenstein, 2014) and the "associated activities and resources provide stability and meaning" (Scott, 2001, p. 48). Understanding the rhetorical efforts associated with professionalizing should be a key objective of communication scholarship focused on identity and work (Ashcraft, et al., 2012; Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007; Meisenbach, 2008).

Well-established compared to fundraising and more stigmatized compared to piloting, librarianship is a profession that has struggled historically to make its case (Wilson, 1984). As such, librarianship offers a distinctive opportunity to study a profession with established macrosocial grounding that is nonetheless engaged in fraught professionalizing made more complicated by virtue of its long history. As such, this research seeks to understand how librarians persuade others of the "mystery of the craft" (Wilensky, 1964, p. 137) and how these persuasive efforts implicate broader discourses surrounding the profession (Ashcraft, 2007; Meisenbach, 2008). Thus, we ask, what do librarians see as threats to their professional identity, if any (RQ1a), and how do librarians communicate to attain legitimacy and status (RQ1b)? Answering RQ1a should ground our analysis in the particular experiences of these librarians and support the analysis of their specific efforts to attain legitimacy and status (RQ1b) in light of the challenges they face. These questions address calls to study the specific communicative strategies associated with identity work for specific professional groups (e.g., Ashcraft, et al., 2012; Lammers & Garcia, 2009). A communicative approach to professions provides an opportunity to examine individuals' talk and thereby explore how professional identity dynamics come to influence organizational life. It draws attention to the symbolic nature of professions and their effects on professionals and their identities. This research also investigates these efforts as

grounded in particular and powerful, historical, and institutionalized understandings of the

profession (Lammers & Barbour, 2006). Taking the historically-grounded, macro-discursive, and

material context of librarianship into consideration should reveal distinctive facets of

professionalization.

Shrinking Budgets, Changing Technologies of Work, and Marian the Librarian

Librarianship, though a well-established profession, is remarkable for its difficult

material and discursive challenges. Librarians must negotiate stigmatized notions of what it

means to be a professional while at the same time coping with shrinking budgets, changing

technologies, and shifting understandings of librarians' work. Meisenbach's (2008) work on the

negotiation of stigmatized professional identity applies: Central to her study of fundraisers was

an effort to broaden the scope of professional identity research to include stigmatized work

especially as compared to professions like doctoring or lawyering. Even so, her study focused on

fundraisers, a profession listed by "U.S. News & World Report as one of the best careers for the

coming years" (p. 264). In contrast, a *USA Today* article singled out libraries and archives as one

of twenty-five dying industries, second only to the failing video rental industry (Stebbens &

Comen, 2017). The incoming American Library Association (ALA) President, James Neal,

highlighted errors in their analysis and responded via Twitter, "Visit a library in your

community. You will be amazed by the energy and innovation, and by the extraordinary growth

in the use of collectives, services, programs and staff expertise…Libraries Lead! Libraries

Transform Lives and Communities!" (Neal, 2017). Afterwards, *USA Today* added an editor's

note correcting their mistake (Stebbens & Comen, 2017). This vignette exemplifies the stigma

libraries face and underscores the stakes of the active and urgent struggle for librarianship.

Librarians have a stake in how people view the profession because it impacts symbolic prestige and tangible salaries and employment (Seminelli, 2016). Library budgets are a popular target for budget cuts, forcing libraries to serve more people with less money and fewer staff. During difficult economic times, library use increases as individuals seek assistance applying to jobs, filing taxes, or accessing inexpensive entertainment (Berger, 2009). However, as recently as 2017, a federal budget draft proposed eliminating the Institute of Museum and Library Services and cutting funds for the Library Services and Technology Act, which provides funds to state library systems (Ewbank, 2017). Budget cuts impact the services librarians can offer as well as available hours and salaries for librarians and library staff. As budgets shrink, but visitation numbers do not, libraries face pressures as community centers. Librarians are asked to take on new, unanticipated roles. For example, in large public libraries, librarians have to be able to recognize signs of drug use and intervene in the case of overdose (Ford, 2017).

At the same time, information technology changes have profoundly impacted librarians and libraries. Card catalogs have been replaced by online databases, more books are available in online formats, and the advent of online lending platforms has called into question the need for brick and mortar libraries. Internet technologies allow people to answer their own reference questions and "made all public libraries, without much advance notice, the computer help desk for the nation" (LaRue, 2017, p. 15). These changes affect "their role, job opportunities, motivation, and even their survival" (Shahbazi & Hedavati, 2016, p. 542). Academic libraries now require "library professionals with qualifications in areas such as digital technology" (Choi & Rasmussen, 2009, p. 466). The very nature of reference questions has shifted, with traditional reference interviews replaced by technology and computer questions. Public librarians have seen "their skills wane in the face of endless attendance on equipment" and academic librarians have

attempted to reinvent their roles "from information provider to guide or facilitator" (LeMaister, Embry, Van Zandt, & Bailey, 2012, p. 269). Not only have librarians seen new demands on their skills, but shifts in the daily activities they must perform.

In addition to financial and technological challenges, librarians face external discourses that challenge their professional status. For example, for many, the image of the librarian is of "Marian," a single, bookish, socially awkward, spinster woman, caricatured famously in the Broadway play *The Music Man* (Wilson, 1958). Other stereotypical images include the old maid, the hipster, and the sexy librarian (Attebury, 2010; Seale, 2008). Complaints about the image of librarians and its negative effects date back to the 1920s and persist today (e.g. Jennings, 2016; Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014; Preer, 2006; Seminelli, 2016). In 1990, the ALA created a task force to enhance the image of libraries and advocated for recognition of librarians as professionals. The National Library Week slogan that year was, "Ask a professional--Ask a librarian" (Schuman, 1990). Pagowksy and Rigby (2014) published an entire edited volume devoted to addressing stereotypes facing librarians, warning that stereotypes can "mislead potential donors, our trustees, or government agencies" and thus threaten funding (p. 8). The image problem affects library users, recruitment to the profession, diversity efforts, and funding (White, 2012). Librarians have been encouraged to "dissolve lingering public assumptions about who librarians are and what librarians do" (Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014, p. 7), lest they continue to plague and diminish the profession.

Negotiating Professional Identity Stigma

The study of librarians' professionalization centers on the interplay among librarians' professional identity negotiation and their communicative efforts to draw on the profession while also resisting the negative constructions of the profession. Professional identity can be a distinct

and powerful resource for individuals. Professional identity can help individuals manage

frustrations with organizational upheaval (e.g., Russo, 1998) or stressful organizational work

demands (e.g., Lammers, Atouba, & Carlson, 2013). As a result, professionals may identify more

strongly with the profession than with their organization or work group. Professional identity, as

a sort of occupational identity, "is especially potent as it easily spans sites (e.g., workplaces,

labor associations, regulatory agencies, trade agencies, family socialization, and popular culture)

and levels (e.g., macro-societal, meso-institutional, and micro-interactional) of organizing"

(Ashcraft, 2007, p. 13).

In negotiating professional identity, workers must also manage its negative facets

(Ashcraft et al., 2012; Meisenbach, 2008). In doing so, professionals reveal fundamental

processes of identity negotiation. For example, in defending the profession, individuals may

underscore the beliefs and logics central to the particular profession (Barbour & Lammers,

2015). Communicative efforts to reframe or rehabilitate the profession can spur new

contradictions and tensions that must be managed (Meisenbach, 2008). As individuals construct

what it means to be a professional, they make sense of their professional identity. Librarians'

communication reveals salient features of their specific profession as they draw upon them to

defend the profession and define their own professional identities. This research also asks, how

do efforts to defend the profession interact with local and macrosocial images of their profession

and their professional identity (RQ2)? In answering this question, this research seeks to reveal

librarians' negotiation of the most salient features of the profession, the professions' core beliefs,

and stigma associated with the profession.

Method

To address the research questions, as part of a larger project, participants were recruited from ten public and academic libraries in two Midwestern states. The first author conducted interviews and observations at five public and three academic libraries, two library systems, one hospital library, and one special library. Recruitment emails informed participants that the voluntary and confidential study would not interfere with work activities; data were collected only after completing the informed consent process. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 65.

The data include 32 interviews, lasting from 22 to 77 minutes, with the average length being 45 minutes. A semi-structured interview schedule allowed participants to lead the conversation while still providing consistency for analysis. Participants described their career trajectory, current job, a good and bad day at work, and involvement in professional organizations. They were also asked about motivations, stress, and reflections on being a librarian. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, obscuring identifying information.

The first author also conducted 76 hours of observation, 60 of which were at a large, municipal public library in the Midwest and 12 hours at an academic library. Additional hours were spent observing two smaller public libraries in nearby towns. The observations in the smaller libraries helped build rapport, in preparation for interviews, and strengthened familiarity with the public library setting. During most observations, the researcher took a participant-as-observer role, sitting near the participants and taking notes. In a few cases, participants asked for help with work tasks, including carrying books or delivering items. These observations developed the researcher's understandings of the daily tasks and language of participants. Most observations took place at the large public library, and the day and timing of observations were systematically varied. The first author also used the observation locations as sites for her own writing and research, spending approximately 35 hours in the primary public library, five hours

in the academic library, and two hours in the smaller public libraries. Although not for formal data collection, these hours helped establish rapport with participants. This exposure to the researcher helped establish credibility and trust, which helped the researcher secure permission to enter areas of the library otherwise restricted to patrons and additional participants.

Analysis

The analysis took what Tracy (2013) called an iterative approach that "alternates between emic, or emergent readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories" (p. 184). Reflection on the data joined with reflection on current interests, theories, and literature. The data immersion phase focused on reading and re-reading the interviews and field notes for initial coding independent, but mindful, of the research questions. This "primary cycle coding" began with assigning short words and phrases based on the initial thoughts and impressions. For example, initial codes meant to be generic and descriptive included "cats," "buns," "knitting," and "shushing." All cycles of data collection and coding involved the drafting of theoretical memos to track insights and relevant literature and to reflect on emergent themes.

This iterative process employed a constant comparative method (e.g. Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to review initial codes, modify those codes, create new codes, and revisit initial explanations while also highlighting librarians' communicative strategies for justifying or defending the profession and capturing moments of reflection regarding professional and other forms of identity. This process, along with an iterative reading of relevant literature, also involved modifying and making more specific the research questions given above.

During "secondary cycle coding," the first author examined the initial code tree and clustered codes into broader concepts, identifying patterns and creating new umbrella concepts. For example, the codes mentioned above (cats, buns, knitting, and shushing) clustered under

"librarian descriptions" which then moved into "stereotypes." These were then moved into

hierarchical codes, for example, including "stereotypes" in "threats to profession/professional

identity." The last stage involved identifying connections between interpretive and disciplinary

concepts and examining the categorizations to address the research questions by looking for

participants resisting external discourses, defending the profession, and articulating their sense of

professional identity in their accounts and during observations.

Findings

Overall, we found stigma and material forces threatening the profession and participants

defending and protecting the profession. Their strategies included differentiating between

librarian and non-librarian activities and elevating their work and professional identities by tying

both to the profession and its standards and values. Librarians' strategies reflected and drew on,

but also had to circumnavigate, salient features of profession: As librarians described and

rejected stereotypes, they revealed concerns about social status. As they aligned themselves with

their formal training, the Master of Library Science (MLS) degree, they invoked "the degree,"

the shared body of knowledge, and a commitment to service. Librarians shared concerns about

public perceptions, and many of their comments responded directly or indirectly to broader,

perceived discourses about librarians. The established, circulating discourses surrounding

librarianship created communicative challenges for librarians' professionalization that differed

from emerging domains of work like fundraising, which do not have to deal with already

crystalized framings for their work, and from established domains of work like piloting, which

suffer relatively less stigma. We organize the detailed findings that follow by research question.

RQ1a. What do librarians see as threats to their professional identity, if any?

In this study, librarians indicated several misconceptions about librarians that they perceived as common and as threatening to the status of their work and the profession. These findings were for the most part commensurate with our historically-grounded, macro-discursive review of the profession, and they serve to ground the analysis that follows in the specific experiences of these participants. These included ideas about librarians' appearance and personalities, job tasks, job titles, and educational backgrounds. All participants shared terms like "mousy," "shy," "bookish," "spinster," "glasses," "bun," and "smart," to explain how the public views librarians. Asked what people say when they describe a librarian, Connor paused, raised his eyebrows, and said with a chuckle: "Dare I say it? Marian the Librarian?"

Although not every participant mentioned Marian, this reference captures a larger theme in the data. Lewis explained, "Cats, knitting, buns. Shhh (pause) um, I've followed the word librarian in popular culture, and it's not well thought of. We have a terrible stereotype. It's a curmudgeonly old bitty, a crone." All the librarians noted negative stereotypes. For some, the stereotypes were unimportant or a nuisance. Like Connor, some participants saw them as funny. For example, Emily joked: "Oh, I know what they say! They think we are old and poor dressers and quiet; you know shushing and all that kind of stuff." For most participants, these stereotypes were a serious problem in and for the profession. Frowning, Reagan explained, "I don't know. I think people tend to focus on the bad rather than the good." Caitlan looked down sheepishly and said "I do shush people sometimes (pause), but I've never had a bun!"

Participants reported being offended by these images and distracted from their mission and role in libraries. Lewis found the stereotypes "irritating" and "damaging," and became animated when discussing them. He explained that the public does not recognize younger, male

librarians. Lewis reported that librarians were in this "difficult loop": negative stereotypes led to people not appreciating librarians' skills, which exacerbates the stereotypes.

A principal implication of the stereotypes was that they obscured the valuable work they do. Marilyn's comments reflected frustration with library patrons' unawareness of librarians' work: "I think they have really very little understanding of what goes on, of what librarians actually do. I think what they see is people who check out books in a circulation desk." Emily joked: "I haven't checked out a book in five years. And that was to myself." Joann explained that people "don't realize the technical complexity that goes into…getting records into the catalog, providing system support for electronic resources." The librarians reported feeling underappreciated. During one observation, a librarian answered several patron questions about locating the bathroom, plugging in a music player, or logging into the computer. During her break, she sighed, asking "Is this what you expected to observe?" She appeared noticeably frustrated and during her interview reflected on how little library users understand about her role.

Librarians wanted to do the work of librarians, as we elaborate below, but found that changing technologies and budgets affected how much control they had over the kinds of work occupying their time. Most participants acknowledged shrinking budgets as a threat to the profession and as motivation for efforts to bolster the profession. Although few participants articulated technology as a threat to the profession per se, observations made clear that Marian, the librarian of old, would little recognize the typical librarian's tasks. Technology created more avenues for patrons to access the library and the librarians. For example, at the large public library, the check-out system utilized scanners and RFID codes to automate the process. Librarians, they initially thought, could then spend more time answering reference questions. Ironically, those questions ended up being about checking out or using computers.

Participants' descriptions of the misconceptions, lack of awareness, and their frustrations revealed serious concerns about the influence of these ideas on the legitimacy and value of their profession. They reported that these ideas stemmed from, or led to, larger misconceptions and stereotypes plaguing the discipline. These threats are bound up with their sense of self and the power of external discourses to disrupt work life. They argued that broad, negative discourses not only exist, but are also an important contextual problem for the profession and their work.

RQ1b. How do librarians communicate to attain legitimacy and status?

To refute these stereotypes, participants strategically negotiated the boundaries of membership in terms of work activities by (a) claiming what they do and (b) rejecting what they should not be doing. Evident in the interviews and the performance of their work, librarians differentiated between librarian and non-librarian activities, and extolled the merits of their specific, professional mastery and formal credentials through "the degree," the masters of library science. For these librarians, specific work activities took on meaning by virtue of their membership in the profession, their formal credentialing, and their beliefs. These activities were juxtaposed with less complex, non-librarian work. The degree instilled formal knowledge and enshrined a specific, value-laden belief system.

A librarian's work. Participants associated certain activities with personal accomplishment and librarian status. For example, librarian activities included helping patrons "find information," "building" or "curating" collections, "teaching," sharing ideas and resources with other librarians, and designing and leading "programming." Most participants used the phrase, "librarian-related" in describing their work, and the sentiment was uniform among all MLS-holding librarians. Non-librarian work, they explained, included "customer service," answering "routine questions," and "checking out a book." During an observation, Matt helped a

patron with a complex question and said as the patron walked away, "See, I answered that tough question. *That's* what a librarian has to be ready to do."

During several observations, librarians responded to patron requests with comments like, "Let's see what we can dig up" or "Hunting for this should be interesting" or "Ooo…this one's a fun little mystery." They seemed to take real pleasure in helping patrons locate resources. These moments in field notes contrasted with their reactions when they were asked questions like how to play music on the computer. They rarely refused to help, but on returning to their work they often seemed annoyed or less enthusiastic. One librarian, working at the reference desk, was interrupted several times by patrons using nearby computers. After walking back and forth several times he joked, saying, "maybe we can use an intern for this, or I need to get orthopedic shoes." For all participants, the primary goal remained assisting library users, even if that meant they were answering questions about the location of the bathroom, checking the weather, or helping people download music. Their devotion to the patrons was held above any personal feelings of frustration. Their commitment to serving, rooted in the mission of the profession, outweighed personal feelings.

Participants reported that non-librarian tasks disrupted other more important work. For example, Rachel explained that if her day is spent helping people with Wi-Fi, "it puts us in a position where we feel a little unbalanced…and it kind of means you can't do some of the other things that used to be more librarian-related jobs." Participants shared feelings of being "unbalanced" or not true to their identity when performing what they felt were menial tasks. Lewis shared his frustrations with questions about the location of bathrooms or getting a library card, noting that if other library staff, and appropriate signage, were in place "you wouldn't be sitting there saying to yourself 'I got a master's degree for this?'" Joann emphasized the

importance of engaging in activities she felt were meant for librarians: "It means my specialty, my role, is organizing information and interpreting it in a form that is usable to patrons." Jason, an academic librarian, emphasized a librarians' role of helping students learn how to get information. For participants, staff meetings or paperwork, or other tasks associated with bureaucracy, were seen as interruptions to their real work.

Several participants at both the large public library and the academic library advocated for a triage system in which patrons or visitors would ask questions at a central hub and be sent to the appropriate library staff member or librarian based on the kind of help they needed. For example, patrons would be sent to a library staff member to retrieve a book, whereas someone asking for help on a research project would be sent to a librarian. Participants' also worked in spaces away from public facing areas to avoid nonlibrarian tasks.

In distinguishing between librarian and non-librarian work, participants explained that patrons see every employee as a librarian and this perception diminished their status as librarians. Julie explained:

Seriously, I think…to somebody who walks in a library anybody who works in a library is a librarian. It doesn't matter, they could be a student page, they can be civil service… it's just assumed that everybody who works there is a librarian.

She noted the difference between employees with the *librarian* title and those with other titles. Trina agreed, "A lot of people think that whoever is working here is a librarian. And for people who went through library school and they went through all the schooling to get to that level, may be frustrated some times."

Being a librarian meant, in part, doing more specialized work than other staff. Matt shared that library staff can help you checkout while "The librarians are the ones who pick the

collections…and do regular programming." Non-librarian staff members' comments reflected

these distinctions too. During an observation, a staff member reported that she corrected people

if they called her a librarian, explaining, "I can't do the searches as the librarians can."

Participants defended the profession and their status as professionals by asserting their distinctive

skills to defend the boundaries of their work.

      The degree: "I'm an MLS." In their accounts, participants connected librarian activities

and their sense of self to the degree as a way of elevating their status and work. They attached

meaning to librarian activities and their professional identity by associating them with the title,

the degree, and the discipline of librarianship. Participants defined librarians as individuals with

degrees who support the discipline's mission, and they advocated for the degree as the standard

for entry and as determining work responsibilities.

      Participants associated the title of "librarian" with the MLS in particular. Librarian

identity was so closely tied to having the degree that one could actually be called the degree. In

describing themselves and colleagues, participants said, "I'm an MLS" and "She's an MLS." For

example, during recruiting, several people offered to connect the researcher with friends, saying,

"I can hook you up with my friend; she's an MLS." Trina's comments above made clear that it

was insulting if people assumed all staff were librarians because actual librarians worked hard to

get that degree. The confusion was not just about who did what, but who could do what, and it

implicated a difference at the core of the professional identity dynamics at play here between a

"degreed librarian" and any other library staff member.

      For example, Jenny, a staff member, explained that the "official difference" between

support staff and librarians was the MLS. That official difference impacted pay and schedules,

including who was placed on longer shifts at the reference desk versus helping patrons check out.

Rarely did library staff correct patrons or turn them away, especially in the public library. At the academic library this was more acceptable: students with reference questions and complex research projects were directed to a subject matter librarian. Ashley, a librarian, defended the distinction:

> I have the degree. Most of the rest of them don't have a degree in library science. They are library employees and I am not saying that they can't help people, but I've taken classes for some of this stuff, but they haven't.

Connecting the MLS to librarian activities, she contended that her education provided essential librarian skills and she could "fall back on" the degree to make good decisions about personnel, complex information searches, and community needs.

The legitimacy of claims on particular work activities stemmed from the degree, a link that participants reported was also under threat. Participants worried that their libraries could not afford to hire degreed individuals, due to shrinking budgets, and thus librarians would need to take on tasks outside of the profession. Rachel remarked, "There's lots of discussions about certain jobs people should perform in the profession, whether or not you need MLS librarians to do certain tasks." She expressed concern about a loss of quality when non-degreed staff take on librarian tasks, and frustration about the blurred distinction. Tracey argued libraries should hire MLS-holding librarians "in a world where money isn't a question mark." Jason explained that emphasizing the degree helped "you protect the profession." Jason highlighted the link between the degree and the profession, and the need to defend both—to persuade the public about the "mystery of the craft" (Wilenksy, 1964, p. 150).

For most participants, library staff, without the degree, should not claim the title *librarian*. Julie compared librarianship to law and librarians to lawyers: "I think you get in

trouble legally if you call yourself a lawyer and you are not a lawyer. And I think that librarianship is a profession just like [law]. And I think like doctors and like lawyers." In an effort to resist negative discourses about librarians, librarians called upon their advanced training and education to defend their status and craft an image of librarians as technologically savvy, thoughtful, skilled professionals. They defended the complexity of their work, the need for the degree, and the boundaries of membership.

Participants explained the degree provided a foundation for their practice. Beth argued that library science students "get taught a bunch of best practices" that would otherwise be neglected or missed through experience alone. Kevin felt the "standardized regiment of training" influenced his daily practice. Rachel wondered if support staff could be similarly trained but concluded that degreed librarians performed in ways she did not think possible without the MLS. Aubrey also emphasized the degree:

Um. I hate to be one of those 'it means I have a Masters' degree in Library Science' people. But to me to some extent, that is part of what it is. I see this as my profession. I see this as my career. This is what I do. And I have [pause] no problem with people who don't have the degree calling themselves a librarian. As long as they are doing professional level tasks and they treat it as something they do professionally.

Participants shared that they saw a difference between an actual professional and people just "calling themselves" a librarian or borrowing the title.

For these librarians, people who borrow the title are not professionals; they are just behaving *like* professionals. Matt commented:

I mean, I'm not big on people calling themselves librarians and they're not because it did take a lot of work for people…even though you have people who work in libraries for

their entire careers and don't have an MLS…but they're in for a penny, in for a pound

when you go to library school and do the whole thing.

Kevin explained, "It matters in the professional world to have that master's degree…I earned

that title, you know. So I am proud of that." Librarians earned the degree, and should be proud.

Participants explained the degree helped them handle complex issues like choosing materials,

learning new technology, managing personnel, or developing information solutions.

Librarianship. For participants, another strategy for uplifting the profession and their

status relative to it was continued support of the profession. Participants holding the MLS were

more likely to report they engaged in the profession. Lewis started grinning when asked if he felt

involved in the profession: "I do. I'm really happy. I got a librarian's email the other day saying

they were quoting me in a paper." Participants characterized professional involvement as

membership in professional associations, reading journals, conference participation, and

publishing. Academic librarians conducted research, presented at conferences, and published in

academic journals. Public librarians were involved with national and state associations, attended

conferences when funding permitted, read blogs, and participated in committees or task forces

when possible. Participants felt that continuing education and sharing their knowledge with new

librarians were also important parts of being in the profession.

In contrast, participants who did not have the degree emphasized their contribution or

involvement in the local organization. For example, Jan, a library staff member, felt that while

she made "an impact in the [library] and to the community" she did not contribute to the

profession: "I don't think I [contribute] in that way." Another library staff member, Anne, did not

think of her job as part of a profession: "In a customer service…I've never thought of it as a

profession as such." Librarians revealed their support of and relationship to the broader

profession by emphasizing certain values and defending the need for an advanced degree. In

connecting work activities, titles, and even their sense of self to the degree and the profession's

values, librarians worked to defend and legitimize their right to professional status.

Having *the degree* represented not just the specific knowledge and skills gained but the

commitment of time, energy, and money and the willingness to make sacrifices to pursue

professional status. According to Caitlan, the degree helps librarians do "bigger picture

thinking." Julie argued that the degree provides an ethical background and "underpinnings and

theory of the profession." Megan thought individuals without the MLS could get experience but

librarians have "different ways of looking at the ethics of information and information sharing."

Getting the degree inculcated a particular set of value-laden beliefs. Librarians saw themselves as

professionals committed to service and driven by a larger cause.

RQ2. How do efforts to defend the profession interact with local and macrosocial images of

their profession and their professional identity?

We have argued so far that the librarians' negotiation of professional identity centered on

(a) the activities they claimed and resisted, (b) the activities they purported to do and machinated

to be able to do, and (c) the legitimacy to claim and reject work by virtue of the title and degree.

In response to RQ2, we found that in doing so, librarianship involved a particular set of

institutionalized beliefs specific to the profession: Librarians should help people get access to

information, promote the free exchange of information, share what they know with other

librarians, develop the skills of knowing in others and particularly the disenfranchised, and make

sacrifices in their commitment to being librarians. We also found, in response to RQ2, that

librarians' efforts to protect and defend their work activities and their status could conflict with

those beliefs central to the legitimate librarian identity, inculcated in getting the degree, and by

extension the local and macrosocial images of their profession. That is, the commitments of being a capital-L Librarian, embodying the ideals of the profession, at times made it difficult to be a librarian, doing the day-to-day work, by narrowing the possibilities available to them in the communicative construction and performance of their work.

Holding and living out the core beliefs of the profession was also a part of having professional purpose. Much of the justification participants offered for requiring a degree rested on the importance of the philosophical and ethical standards of the discipline. Participants argued that these values included "fair access to information," protecting "privacy," opposition to censorship, "intellectual freedom," protecting the rights of authors through "copyright," and ethical conduct. Many of these ideas are explicit in the ALA's (2008) *Library Bill of Rights and the Code of Ethics*. Four participants referred directly to this ALA document, and many participants' accounts reflected these principles.

Participants lived out these beliefs in the scholarship they did, how they chose collections, and in their work. For example, Lewis mentioned that he saw the self-checkout process as way to protect privacy. He explained that if a 15-year-old boy wants a book on sexuality, he is more likely to borrow it if he can avoid the embarrassment of a librarian seeing it. Charlotte reported that librarians "value access to information and fair access to information." Jillian pointed out that in libraries "we have every ethnic group; we have every religious group; we have every kind of person you can imagine…so you try to meet everybody's needs as best you can." Regardless of background, individuals are entitled to get the information they want, confidentially. Lewis said, "my mission is to get information to the people that need it."

The day-to-day work could affirm what it meant to be a librarian. Participants explained that librarian activities made them feel most like themselves. For example, Beth shared this love

for developing resources and enjoyed "figuring out a cool way to get information to other

librarians." Similarly, Julie said:

> I like talking to other people. I like doing. I like doing the workshops. I liked talking to
>
> people about how to live a more sustainable life in the workplace…I like developing new
>
> information resources, so it is always fun for me to be able to, when I have the time, to sit
>
> down and develop a new guide or something like that.

Connor said his most fulfilling moments are when "the light goes on" for someone he helps.

Ruth saw helping patrons get information as rewarding: "It is rewarding when they are like 'oh,

that's just what I need' or 'I didn't know how to search for that'." Violet shared this feeling:

"When I can help a patron resolve an issue…it makes you feel good." Beth exclaimed, "I love

working at the reference desk" and felt a good day included more time with challenging

questions and information seeking than answering basic logistical questions. Cara, an archivist,

said she really enjoyed getting to "play with the old stuff." Her journey to becoming a librarian

included a desire to preserve important artifacts and when she could not get to those tasks she

felt distanced from her professional purpose.

Librarians were eager to use new technologies that could help them do librarian work,

and they read the usefulness of new technologies through beliefs about how the work should be

done. Charlotte reflected on the importance of access to information noting, "the whole tension

between publishers and librarians and organizations that want to make information really openly

accessible and some publishers are very understanding and have made it easier to do it and some

publishers do not." Marilyn shared concerns about complications to access that come from

digitizing collections. Joann pointed out that although digitization can be useful, the physical

formats do not disappear. The library absorbs all formats, making it difficult for librarians to

keep up with the changes and libraries to afford all the materials. A preservation librarian noted that digitization could make it harder to justify the preservation unit, unless they adapted to the changes. Digitization was at once important for patron access to information, and also potentially negative for the future duties of librarians. Participants, however, saw it as their responsibility to navigate the changes and make sense of new expectations and duties.

Even as technology provided opportunities for librarian work, those same advances created more non-librarian work including answering questions about technology use, helping patrons download music, or troubleshooting log on issues. During one observation, a librarian spent twenty minutes helping a senior citizen learn how to use the mouse and explaining Internet browsers. At the large public library, the self-checkout area created enough questions that librarians were staffed to troubleshoot. For librarians, this work could, and perhaps should, be done by library staff and student workers.

Efforts to claim and reject work conflicted with librarian commitments. As such, participants' strategies for rejecting non-librarian work tended to be more indirect. In rare cases, participants were observed calling over a staff member or page to help. Typically, participants simply served even if the work was, to them, beneath their skills. Librarians were, however, visibly frazzled when asked questions about finding the bathrooms or checking out. Librarians' daily performance of work demonstrated a commitment to service over personal fulfillment, even if it meant ending the day feeling annoyed or unbalanced.

The broader material constraints of the profession narrowed what was possible as well. The leader of a large municipal library, herself a librarian, refused to post signage that might reduce mundane questions about the bathroom, because she argued it would make the library unappealing for visiting donors who the library counted on for financial support. Putting titles on

the nametags might also reveal how increasingly few staff were librarians. In one site, participants wore nametags but leadership prohibited using titles on them. To do so would be inconsistent with their institutionalized beliefs about the profession. A participant reported discomfort with using titles because it would unfairly put them above staff members. Claiming the special status of the profession was itself inconsistent with the core beliefs of the profession.

These constraints intersected with the clearly gendered nature of the macrosocial image of their work (Ashcraft, 2013). Being a librarian meant dealing with "Marian," the dominant, gendered image. Participants presenting as female joked about the Marian image as a way to dismiss that image. Most of the participants were female, which represents the field today. Participants presenting as male found the stereotype insulting and disruptive. The Marian archetype, as submissive and dutiful and feminine, limited librarians' choices. Even when participants wanted to delegate non-librarian work, the expectation from patrons and administration was that such behavior was inappropriate.

Discussion

As librarians face threats to the profession and professional status, they professionalize. This research contributes to the communicative study of professional identity negotiation in at least three ways: First, it confirms past theorizing and research that conceives of professionalization as *ongoing, communicative* and *macrosocial*. Second, it reveals specific strategies for bolstering the profession employed in participants' framing and performance of their work. Third, the study makes clear that the beliefs at the core of professions can complicate and stymie the very efforts undertaken to protect it. In this case, living out the core beliefs of librarianship narrowed communicative strategies for bolstering the profession in librarians' accounts of their work and in the work itself.

First, participants provided accounts of their efforts to promote the profession and to do work they saw as in keeping with their professional identity. Participants also lived this out in their work during observations by muddling through non-librarian work and venting their frustrations during interviews. Participants were aware of the macrosocial and stigmatized ideas about who they should be and what their work should be. Their efforts drew on and were also constrained and supported by existing "images" of their work (Ashcraft, 2007). Librarianship contrasts with emerging professions in that existing notions of what it means to be a librarian are very-well established. Future research should continue to investigate professionalization as chronic rather than acute in the sense that it involves ongoing efforts even when the profession is well-established. This research suggests that established professional identity can compound, rather than simplify, the communicative difficulties of professionalization.

Librarians called upon institutional resources including their training and their professional association to defend their work, their title, and their right to be viewed as a professional and thus part of a profession. Participants even referred to themselves as the degree: "I am an MLS." The degree provided command over a body of knowledge and a value-laden ethic of work, which provided the ability to handle particular work activities better than other staff. Further, librarians pointed to ethical standards to serve all populations fairly and ethically. In doing so, librarians invoked a commitment to the profession and its expected values and norms for conduct. This finding confirms the value of conceptualizing and studying professionalization as a macrosocial and communicative enterprise (Ashcraft, 2012). Macro discourses, in this research, provided both resources and constraints to librarians' professionalization strategies.

Second, librarians' communicative strategies for managing their professional identity tied certain activities to their identity and elevated those activities by defining them as linked to the broader professions. Participants claimed tasks like teaching, providing insight, searching, curating collections, programming, and helping colleagues, and rejected tasks like answering mundane questions, checking out books, and troubleshooting computer issues. They claimed and rejected these tasks in their framing of their work. They understood new technologies in terms of librarian and non-librarian uses (Bailey and Leonardi, 2015). They advocated for formal systems to divide work and performed work outside of the profession effectively and efficiently. They vented, laughed, and soldiered on to get the work done. To serve meant to serve all people in all cases, even at the risk of feeling frustrated or diminished as a professional. Rarely did participants delegate tasks because it meant not serving and in public libraries, especially, it meant answering to management about how time was spent. Given that several administrators were former librarians, this points to the need for understanding how negotiation of stigma changes as professionals move into management positions.

The enactment of these strategies had implications for the success of their identity management and their actual work. Participants reported that their professional identity felt most salient when they could engage in activities associated with the profession. They preferred to perform activities they saw as librarian-related and felt "unbalanced" when they could not focus on those activities. They ascribed meaning to and derived a sense of self, a sense of fulfillment, from those activities they associated with the profession.

Third, this research contributes to our understanding of the communicative nature of professionalization when efforts to defend the "mystery of the craft" (Wilensky, 1964, p. 137) and thus provide legitimacy, meaning, and value to the profession are complicated by the beliefs

central to the craft itself. Librarians' professionalization efforts were constrained by macrosocial

stigma and material constraints. The material constraints facing the profession included scarce

budgets and shifting notions and tools of work. Discursive constraints included the stigmatizing,

established, and gendered image of the profession marked most prominently by Marian.

Distinctive to this research, though, we also found librarians defending the mystery of a craft that

was itself antithetical to mystery. The mission of libraries and librarians is to promote egalitarian

access to information for all. The very discursive resources available to promote and defend the

profession contributed to a not always helpful reification of the professional.

In practice, this contradiction muted the librarians' communicative strategies for

managing and resisting the stigma of the profession. They had more well-defined but less

flexible frames for their work than, for example, Meisenbach's (2008) fundraisers. They were

more likely to use oblique and indirect strategies to define and defend the boundaries of

membership and librarian work. They extolled "the degree," centered identity constructions and

activity around it, and argued it granted them special, elite knowledge and skills. At the same

time, they celebrated the sharing of information and knowledge with everyone. Rather than

seeking to resolve the contradictions, they accommodated them, enshrining and protecting the

nobility of the profession. Future research should consider how the specific beliefs inherent to

professional identity (Barbour & Lammers, 2015), as well as the features of professional work in

general, complicate ongoing professionalization efforts.

Ideas for Practice

The findings revealed librarians' preoccupation with the external discourses threatening

the profession, especially negative stereotypes that work to diminish their value as professionals.

This insight should be helpful for organizations employing professionals, especially

professionals facing threats to their status. In the case of librarians, participants complained that

the administration, which consisted in most cases of more senior librarians, refused to

differentiate between librarians and library staff. Doing so addressed concerns about the displays

of status differences and the appearance of the library, but at the same time, it had real costs for

the library. Yet, this research suggests that name badges, signs, and other symbols would help

librarians protect those activities which really do require their expertise and reduce some of the

daily stressors, like pointing out bathrooms. Budget cuts that require more libraries to rely on

non-degree staff exacerbate the problem. This research suggests that libraries, librarians, and

library associations could benefit from articulating the merits of "the degree" and the profession

in terms of the valuable work of librarians. The findings also indicate that library leaders should

provide spaces away from foot traffic and autonomy over work practices. At the same time, this

research makes clear the need to make explicit the contradictions between (a) articulating the

value and importance of libraries and librarians and (b) the ethos of librarianship as quiet and

egalitarian. Doing so should help surface the tensions to help navigate them.

This research also has implications for the usefulness of professional identity in helping

mitigate and manage stress and burnout while bolstering work satisfaction. For example, the

protections from burnout provided by professional identity may be weakened if professional

identity is diminished (Lammers, Atouba, & Carlson, 2013). Stigmatized professions may not

offer the same protections, or they may be eroded as professionals must do work they find

frustrating and inconsistent with their identity. Under such circumstances, organizations may

find it challenging to protect employees from stress and burnout and elicit feelings of

identification, and this problem may be compounded in organizations employing professional

and paraprofessional staff. In this case, the librarians felt frustrated by staff meetings and

bureaucratic tasks *especially when* they consumed most of their day and kept them from other work. These findings indicate that library leadership should mitigate threats to professional identity by removing constraints on the librarians' ability to engage in activities they find meaningful, which may in turn bolster librarians' ability to cope with budget constraints, technology change, and macro-level forces systems outside of their direct control. For example, they might do so by making clear that librarians' focusing on the work of librarians is wise stewardship of resources, and by facilitating conversations among librarians and library staff about the best strategies for handling routine work (e.g. developing a triage system). Professionals who come to see the organization as impeding their ability to realize their professional identity and do the work of the profession may be less likely to identify with their employing organization or be motivated to work in its interests. Additionally, this research suggests that libraries and librarians would benefit from concerted efforts to raise awareness of the community and public officials about the nature of librarians' work and the ways they meet community needs using specialized skills and knowledge.

Conclusion

The implications for theory, future research, and practice of this study should be understood in the context of the study's limitations. For example, most participants worked and were educated in the Midwest. Not all participants graduated from the same program, but similar socialization processes may have contributed to participants' similarities and influenced the findings. Additionally, the gendered nature of the macrodiscursive constructions of librarianship are key (e.g., quiet Marian dare not reject a service request). Although the interviews did not specifically ask questions aimed at gender, constraining the examination of gender here, the findings make clear the importance of gender in future research. Likewise, the study draws on a

small sample of librarians, primarily from public libraries, although collecting data at multiple

sites helped mitigate this concern and support conclusions about macrosocial phenomena

(Lammers and Barbour, 2006).

Future research should also focus on librarianship in settings such as law firms, policy

centers, and in knowledge management and technology roles. The MLS degree is increasingly

seen as preparation for corporate work to the extent that profitable enterprise is increasingly

knowledge-intensive or knowledge-based (ALA, 2018). Indeed, exit from an orthodox library

setting offers a powerful if complicating path for the librarian dealing with shrinking budgets.

This research suggests that beliefs core to the profession such as egalitarian access to information

might make work in unorthodox settings even more complex and the identity management

challenges more difficult. An institutional and communicative approach to these questions

should help reveal the extra-organizational influences at play. Professionals' communication

functions as a part of ongoing professionalization wherein individuals must continuously defend

and define their profession over time. Professional identity may be most salient when they

engage in activities they associate with the profession, activities which come to take on meaning

and value by virtue of that association. These findings make clear though how challenging it can

be to draw even upon relatively stable structures of a profession to make sense of and find

meaning in work, and thus in our sense of self.

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