



# Men in Law Librarianship

by Greta Boeringer

Gender has everything to do with my choice to be a librarian. I attempted several “male” areas of study—chemistry, economics, law—before embracing librarianship. I know how it felt to be part of a profession where I was the minority gender. Do the same stresses and challenges apply to men in librarianship? What biases and prejudices do they encounter on account of gender? This isn’t another article about men getting promoted faster and having higher salaries than women. I am interested in the subjective experience of men in law librarianship: how does it feel?

Do the various studies in the literature apply to men in law librarianship as to men in librarianship generally? Is it useful to compare men in law librarianship to men in nursing or social work? Research should be done on men in law librarianship to answer these questions.

The first article I found broke my heart (Allan Angloff’s “The Male Librarian—An Anomaly,” *Library Journal*, 2/59). This brave man provides a candid description of society’s displeasure with his choice to be a librarian, and makes an optimistic, affirmative response. Are the prejudices he encountered a thing of the past, or do our male colleagues experience them too?

James V. Carmichael, Jr., surveyed male librarians in October 1991 (“The Male Librarian and the Feminine Image: A Survey of Stereotype, Status, and Gender Perceptions,” *Library & Information Science Research* 2/92, also summarized in “Gender Issues in the Workplace: Male Librarians Tell Their Side,” in *American Libraries* 3/94, with a response by a female “reactor panel”). His survey coincided with the Clarence Thomas hearings and the William Kennedy Smith rape trial, which may account for his high response rate (74%).

The most shocking revelation of Carmichael’s survey was the existence of sexual harassment of men. A total of 57 cases were reported, 11 by other men, the balance by women. Some men were sexually harassed by both genders.

Another recurring problem for men in librarianship was the stereotype that male librarians are gay. In fact, in Carmichael’s survey, less than 10% of respondents

identified themselves as gay—the same level found in surveys of the population as a whole. So there is no evidence that men in librarianship are more likely to be gay.

Men in librarianship struggle against a perception that they are gay. Even if being gay were an emotionally and politically neutral status, it is always irritating to be seen as something we are not. But the truth is that the stereotype of the gay man is rarely a complimentary one, as untrue as that is. Thus, gay men suffer even more from the gay stereotype: “I am gay but I am not that.” None of us are stereotypes.

Suzanne Pharr (the Women’s Project in Little Rock, Arkansas) called *Homophobia a Weapon of Sexism* (1988, reprinted in 1997 with an annotated bibliography). I believe that the negative gay stereotype is used as a weapon against men who have too closely allied themselves with women by choosing to work in a female-dominated workplace.

Sexual discrimination against men exists as well. For men it might be being expected to lift and carry heavy objects, or to complete dirty or unpleasant tasks. Men might be more likely to be called upon to work late hours or deal with combative patrons. Yet some men also found themselves volunteering for these tasks. Men also might find themselves excluded from conversations among their female co-workers. Or a group of women might launch into vituperative statements against men with a man present under the guise of “he’s one of us.”

According to the survey, being gay was not necessarily a refuge from sexual discrimination. Some gay men were expected not to seek supervisory positions. But other men spoke warmly of how welcoming the world of librarianship was for them as gay men, as opposed to other job experiences.

Another study on men in librarianship measured attitudes toward male librarians of three groups: undergraduate students, MLS students, and librarians themselves (Locke J. Morrissey and Donald O. Case, “There Goes My Image: Perception of Male Librarians by Colleague, Student and Self,” *College & Research Libraries* 9/88). The striking result of this survey was that the male librarians believed that the public

viewed them far more negatively than it does. The article urges librarians to stop worrying about negative image, and begin promoting themselves.

None of the published studies of men in librarianship that I found focused on law librarians. Do male law librarians face these or similar challenges? Conversely, what do they value most about this profession?

In the larger body of literature on men in nursing I found one article on men in social work. Most interesting is Jeanne Paar Lemkau’s “Men in Female-Dominated Professions: Distinguishing Personality and Background Features,” (*Journal of Vocational Behavior* 2/84). She paints a fascinating profile of men that choose such professions. She describes them as androgynous and tender-minded—i.e., kind and gentle. These men reported the positive influence of women in their lives. She makes the extraordinary suggestion that these men may have experienced loss or major stress that has emotionally sensitized them. Another interesting finding was that some men enter female-dominated professions as part of an upwardly mobile progression relative to their family of origin. Certainly, this study does not do justice to the wonderful men with whom we share our profession and our workplaces.

In summary, I think there is more to learn about men in law librarianship than comparable salaries and promotions. We can learn from their stories. We should learn more about the men we share our workplaces with, more about their experiences as law librarians who happen to be men. Such an inquiry would teach us a great deal about ourselves as women and men, as librarians, and as a profession. Any men interested in participating in a study of their workplace and professional experiences, please contact me (boeringer@maclaw.law.cuny.edu). I urge, as Carmichael urges, that we listen to each other and be open to changing our attitudes. Let’s celebrate the diversity men bring to law librarianship!

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