Whose Mom Is a Librarian?
or Does Gender Make a Difference in Children's Librarianship?

by Melvin K. Burton

A couple years ago as I was helping transport a group of youth back to church after activities at the YMCA, the minister's son kept calling out to people in nearby vehicles, "Excuse me, do you have any Grey Poupon?" When I referred to "the PK" in our van, I had to explain that PK stood for preacher's kid. Then I said — referring to one of my own children — that we also had an LK, a librarian's kid. Almost as a chorus, the response was, "Whose mom is a librarian?"

This gender expectation has not been uncommon in my experience. While working in St. Louis, I made a career presentation with two female architects to a sixth grade class. One of the students commented that she expected the roles to be reversed. Once when a female branch librarian and I were visiting classes at a K-8 school, the school secretary started telling me where the upper grade classes were and the branch librarian where the primary grade classes were located. As we explained to the secretary that we would be visiting the opposite grades, she mused for a moment and commented, "Oh, role reversal!"

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The disparity in the number of male children's librarians versus the number of female children's librarians has not only resulted in stereotyping but also has had an adverse effect on the work that children's librarians do. That effect includes such aspects as the attitudes of children toward the quality of work of male children's librarians, our ability to lead male children to reading, and the self esteem of male librarians. Our profession needs to have a greater number of male children's librarians, not only to discourage the stereotyping that occurs, but also to achieve better our goal of leading as many children as possible to a love of reading.

Librarianship is a profession chosen most often by females. Fay Zipkowitz cites in "Placements and Salaries" that "The proportion of women graduates to men graduates (from library school) follows the traditional pattern — 22 percent men to 78 percent women for 1991."[1] A compilation of the special placements statistics from the annual *Library Journal* survey of library school graduates of the last fifteen years indicates the preponderance of women employed in the area of library services to children. Of the 1,561 people indicating a preference for working in the area of children's services in the public library, 1,478 were women and 83 were men, representing 5.3 percent of the total. The total percentage of men in the special placement surveys was almost 19 percent for all areas of librarianship.[2]

Other sources cite similar conclusions. A survey of Illinois librarians found that "The children's librarians in the sample were almost entirely female."[3] A Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship study showed occupational segregation of women and that "the perceived 'lower' status of work with children attracts very few men."[4] In a check of male/female first names in the 1991 *Youth Services Personnel Directory* for North Carolina, there were 222 female names and 16 male names or 6.7 percent of the total.[5] It can be concluded that about 20 percent of the people in the profession of librarianship are men, and in children's librarianship, the number is reduced to approximately to one fourth of that, or 5 to 7 percent.

The great number of females who are librarians tends to stereotype the profession as female, and also may stereotype the males who are working as librarians. A recent study by James Carmichael, Jr., assistant professor at UNCG, delineates the male librarian stereotypes and the difference that gender has made in male librarians' work experience and self esteem. Carmichael surveyed male librarians from the membership of ALA, and 60 percent of those surveyed indicated the existence of a male librarian stereotype in the public perceptions of their image. Of those indicating a stereotype, the respondents noted "the prevalent stereotype as effeminant (probably gay) (81%)."[6] Other stereotypes listed by over half the respondents referred to "lack of social skills, and power (59%) and lack of ambition (55%)."[7] Some of the responses (32%) indicated a tendency for supervisors to set aside manual labor jobs for the male librarians.[8] They referred to the necessity of doing heavy lifting, driving vans, and repairing machines.

When I interviewed for a job shortly after leaving library

school, I was told by the director that he was interested in hiring me for the job since, being male, I could also drive the bookmobile. I responded by telling the director that I didn't even have a driver's license and subsequently was not offered employment. One occurrence may not connect with the other, but the suspicion exists.

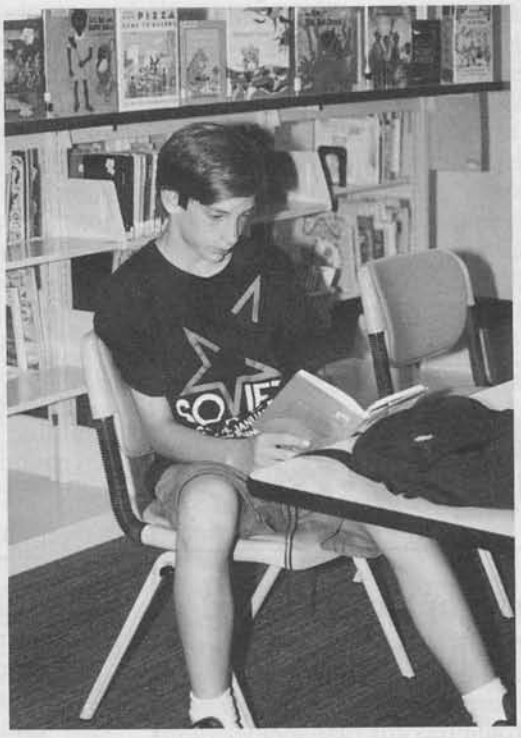
Carmichael concludes that the feminine stereotyping of library work does lower the self esteem of male librarians and that the areas of library work that most men engage in may be an attempt to shunt them away from more feminine areas of librarianship. Those feminine areas are such tasks as children's work and cataloging.[9] If male librarians perceive themselves to be stereotyped negatively, how much more negative is the stereotype in children's services in the public library, an area of librarianship with the largest percentage of females?

It does not seem to be a matter of whether men are capable of engaging in child rearing or child nurturing occupations. I experienced single parenting for the first school year that my children were in North Carolina while my wife continued temporarily with her job in St. Louis. Other men have been effective in taking a larger part in the rearing of children. In one anthropological study by Barbara Smuts, male olive baboons were found to help care for children "even if they hadn't fathered the infants."[10] If males of other animal species can take part in child rearing activities, then surely we can accept the ability of male human beings to do the same. A small percentage of men are children's librarians, but probably more men have the ability to be children's librarians.

If we accept the capability of men to function as children's librarians, we are still left with the perceptions of the general public. Most important is the perception of children, the primary patrons of children's librarians. Linda Gettys and Arnie Cann of UNCC studied the expectations of both male and female children in regard to which sex would be most likely to engage in an occupation. Male and female dolls were used, and the children were asked to point to which person does that job. Librarian was one of the occupations used in the study, and 56 percent of the two and three year olds pointed to the male doll. With the older children, the percentages dramatically changed. Only 16 percent of the four- and five-year-olds pointed to the male doll, and 3 percent of the six and seven year olds pointed to the male doll when asked the question, "Who does the job of a librarian?" Perhaps the higher percentage among the two- and three-year-olds was due to them not being as familiar with this job as with the other occupations. For other "female" jobs, this age range responded with the percentages secretary, 33 percent; teacher, 22 percent; dancer, 39 percent; and model, 33 percent. For all but the occupation of model, the percentage of children choosing the male doll also decreased in the older age groups.[11] Gettys and Cann reasoned that "By the time children enter the public school system they are apparently quite skilled in responding according to adult sex stereotypes."[12] With book and television reinforcement, children "are likely to narrow considerably their professional aspirations to conform to the sex stereotypes they have learned."[13]

Not only would a child expect the librarian to be female, but also the child may expect the female to be more competent in her job than a male doing the same job. Arnie Cann and Alethea K. Garnett researched how sex role stereotypes affect the competence expectations of children. Children in kindergarten through third grade were asked to place poker chips in front of a male and female doll according to how well that person would do the job that was named. The results followed the sex role stereotypes in that, "Females were expected to be more competent in the traditionally female occupations, and males were perceived as superior in the male sex-typed roles."[14]

Human beings learn by observation. As a child grows up, models other than parents and siblings assume importance. Some examples of these models are peers, teachers, and recreational leaders.[15] Just as children form their stereotypes by observation, children use role models to help decide what their values will be. Reading is what we as children's librarians promote as a value to children. There is, however, a marked difference in the amount that girls read in comparison with the amount that boys read.



The results of a survey of teenagers about their reading was given in a *School Library Journal* article written by Constance Mellon, Assistant Professor in the Department of Library and Information Studies at East Carolina University. Although many teenagers answered that they did read in their spare time, 72 percent of the males responded affirmatively, as opposed to 92 percent of the females indicated that reading was one of their choices of leisure time activity.[16] This difference continued in the use of the public library; 66 percent of the girls used the public library as opposed to 41 percent of the boys.[17]

In a report of research by R. S. Newman and H. W. Stevenson, no sex differences were found in the tenth grade as far as reading achievement is concerned, but girls outperformed boys at decoding words and reading comprehension in grades two and five.[18] Another study of those children diagnosed with reading disorders reveals that in this area, the numbers are about equal for boys and girls. A team of researchers led by Sally Shaywitz of Yale University surmised that gender bias may play a part in reading disorder identification, with the suspicion being that boys are more likely to be identified as reading-disabled when the problem is really a behavioral one.[1] Gender bias may play a part in

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judging reading achievement since there may be different rates of learning for the sexes just as there are different rates for physical development. Whether both sexes can read equally well may not matter as much as whether they read at all.

That difference between sexes in reading versus non-reading behavior appears to increase as people go into adulthood. In June 1987, a user survey of adult patrons (age sixteen and above) in the Gaston-Lincoln Regional Library found that 77 percent of the 785 respondents were female.[20] Carol Hole explores this issue in her article for *American Libraries*, "Click! The Feminization of the Public Library." In it, she refers to a survey conducted by Bernard Vavrek that showed 80 percent of adult users of public libraries were women. Carol Hole contended that many public libraries' collections reflect feminine interests and since we don't have what men want, "They have simply given up on the library."[21]

Is it any wonder that vast numbers of men are non-readers when from a very young age they have perceived occupations that dealt with reading as feminine ones? We are in the midst of a cycle of perceptions affecting actions which in turn affect perceptions. The small percentage of children's librarians who are male contributes to the stereotyping of librarianship as a feminine profession. Boys are discouraged from thinking of children's librarianship as a career by their own stereotyping. Another effect may be the gender difference in the amount of reading that occurs which could be ameliorated by having more male "reading role models." The non-reading of males also appears to increase as males get older. An increase in the number of men that are employed in reading-related professions should make a difference in changing the gender perceptions of those reading-related occupations and in encouraging boys to become readers.

Librarianship is a profession composed of approximately 80 percent females and children's librarianship is about 95 percent female. Carmichael's study indicates that some male librarians perceive some social stigma attached to their employment as librarians. Other psychological studies show that the number of females in librarianship influences children not only to expect the librarian to be a female, but also to expect the female to be more competent than the male. Finally, the small number of male children's librarians may detract from the ability of the librarianship profession to lead young male children to reading.

A more equal dispersal of sexes in the librarianship profession should have a positive impact on our relationships with each other and the patrons that we serve. Let's make sure that children's services departments have equal standing with other departments, that male children's librarians are encouraged to stay in that area of librarianship, that male librarians work in areas that are visible to young children, and that library directors and library boards understand that encouraging boys to read is too important to detract from by engaging in gender bias. If we become successful at eliminating sex stereotyping and gender bias in librarianship, then perhaps when the word librarian is mentioned to a group of young people, the response won't automatically be, "Whose mom is a librarian?"

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