Ageism in Academic Librarianship

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Background

Nearly one out of every ten librarians is under the age of thirty.[1] The average age of a graduate student in library and information science is 30-35 years old.[2] Between 2010-2020, 45% of librarians will reach the retirement age of 65 years old.[3] The relative age of the profession will continue to decrease as retirements increase. Statistically, the population of young librarians is a growing minority.

Young, new librarians face age discrimination, including disrespectful treatment in the workplace and unrealistic expectations of performance. Ageism in academic libraries results in job dissatisfaction and loss of retention for these new librarians. A "revolving-door trend" of new librarians is particularly troubling in light of concerted recruitment and retention efforts.[4] The following explores library literature on ageism and presents anecdotal evidence related to age discrimination in academic librarianship.[5]

Literature Review

Most research related to ageism in librarianship focuses on challenges faced by *older* librarians. These challenges range from stereotyping—e.g. being inflexible or uncreative, unwilling to accept change or new technologies[6]—to discrimination in hiring, promotion, and evaluations.[7] Much has been written on the aging or "graying" of librarianship, predominantly on issues of retirement and recruitment.[8] Research specific to age discrimination of young and/or new librarians is limited, however.

Lancaster discusses professional and personal differences between librarians of four distinct generations: Traditionalists, born prior to 1946; Baby Boomers, born 1946-64; Generation X or "Gen Xers," born 1965-81; and Millennials, born 1982-2000.[9] She cites the frustration of a "Gen Xer" librarian: "I know I look like I'm 12 years old […]

but I'm a professional librarian with a master's degree and five years of experience."[10] Gordon acknowledges some young librarians may feel "ALA's [American Library Association's] true recruitment campaign motto is 'Recruit, Refuse, Ridicule'."[11] A dichotomy is noted between active recruitment of new librarians and their poor treatment in the workplace: "[…] library administrators and coworkers are treating newly minted young librarians badly."[12] The literature lacks comprehensive study of the intergenerational dynamics of library staffing.

One survey of librarians' first jobs points to bureaucracy and resistance as sources of discontent in the workplace—in other words, hearing the common refrain "because it's always been done that way."[13] Additionally, new librarians report feeling isolated and encountering a "culture of disrespect" in academic research libraries.[14] A "bias" against young librarians, particularly due to their lack of experience, leaves many feeling "discouraged, their input belittled."[15]

Given the range of experience, education, and communication styles in a library, some degree of workplace conflict seems inevitable. Nevertheless, only 57.9% of novice librarians surveyed agree to the statement, "Libraries are an open and affirming place for new librarians."[16] A remarkable 59% of new librarians with 1-3 years of work experience have changed jobs at least once, with job dissatisfaction of young librarians attributed, in part, to "the inability of older generations to understand and accept them as peers."[17] Another cause is "burnout" from new librarians taking on too many responsibilities,[18] possibly related to unsustainable expectations of performance. These factors of actual and perceived discrimination against young librarians culminate in loss of retention for librarianship.

Berry makes an appeal to "Baby Boomers" to offer consideration and receptivity to new, young librarians: "Letting go means showing respect to these new librarians, their styles, and especially their ideas about how we can improve library service. […] It means letting go of the need to tell them how they do it wrong, how we tried their idea years ago, or how we solved that problem long before."[19] Further research exploring age discrimination of young librarians is necessary to better understand its impact on recruiting, retention, and job satisfaction.

From the Field

The following sample of anecdotal comments and accounts was gathered and provides preliminary documentation of ageism. A request for examples—specifically how young and/or new librarians are not treated equally as colleagues—was sent to an email listserv for new librarians.[20] Twenty-one responses were received. Additional accounts were shared privately by peers. Comments have been grouped into

categories, with identifying information removed for confidentiality, and some overarching patterns condensed.

First are remarks from tenured librarians to young, new librarians; the overall tone dismissive and patronizing:

- "I've been a librarian longer than computers have been around. They didn't even have HTML when I was in library school."
- "It's just always been done this way."
- "When are you getting married already?"
- "We've already tried that."

Indicative of a lack of understanding (e.g. librarians as faculty), comments from college students to new librarians seem disrespectful:

- "How old *are* you?"
- "Want to go out sometime?"
- "Are you a student here?"

Advice from mentors and veteran librarians to novice librarians is, for the most part, supportive yet cautious:

- "Keep your mouth shut at meetings and pay your dues. That's just the way it works in academia."
- "When feeling marginalized, find someone established and tenured to bring your ideas to the table."
- "Don't ever forget others decide your tenure."

Observations from young and/or new librarians further verify age discrimination with evident frustration and dissatisfaction:

- "Why did they even hire me, if they don't want to hear what I have to say?"
- "I won't speak up unless I feel really strongly about something. It's not worth getting dismissed or shot down."
- "There's so much conflict and disrespect between the new and the experienced."
- "I won't feel safe until I'm tenured."

Finally, the last category includes what some may claim are unreasonable performance expectations. Young librarians are expected to be: technologically savvy; comfortable with change and active change agents; highly motivated and productive; optimistic (e.g. not yet "burned out" or "cynical"); energetic and enthusiastic with

"fresh" ideas; willing and able to work longer hours; physically healthy; ready to "hit the ground running"; and in general, more "in touch" with students. Indeed, exhaustion and dissatisfaction seem likely given the excessive expectations placed on a neophyte librarian.

Discussion

Although limited in scope and lacking detailed context, the above "field notes" reveal commonplace yet insidious discrimination against new librarians. Additional research might explore the distinction between "young" librarians—both those younger in age than their colleagues and those simply perceived as young—and novice librarians, including those who are new to the profession but not necessarily young. Studies into deliberate versus unintentional incidents of age discrimination, or how ageism varies in non-academic library settings, might also be of interest.

While further empirical study on age discrimination of young librarians is certainly necessary, existing literature and anecdotal evidence indicate a perceived lack of respect in the workplace leading to dissatisfaction and loss of retention of new librarians. As with ethnic and other forms of discrimination, ageism against young, new librarians cannot be remedied without prior acknowledgement and proper documentation. Initial preventative measures, particularly for administrators and tenured librarians, may include clear articulation and revision of performance expectations; professional development workshops, comparable to diversity awareness training; and both arranged and informal mentorships between veteran and young librarians. Forthcoming research from the author will expand on age discrimination and its complex relationship with recruiting, retention, and job satisfaction in academic libraries.

This article is based on the author's poster session for Diversity in Academic Libraries, an interest group of California Academic and Research Libraries, May 2007.

Footnotes

1. Mary Jo Lynch, "Age of Librarians," American Library Association, Office for Research and Statistics (1999), http://www.ala.org/ala/ors/reports/ageoflibrarians.htm.

2. Denise M. Davis, "Library Retirements: What Can We Expect," *American Libraries* 36, no. 8 (2005): 16.

3. Mary Jo Lynch, Stephen Tordello, and Thomas Godfrey, "Retirement & Recruitment: A Deeper Look," *American Libraries* 36, no.1 (2005): 26.

4. Susanne Markgren, Thad Dickinson, Anne Leonard, and Kim Vassiliadis, "The Five-Year Itch: Are Libraries Losing Their Most Valuable Resources?" *Library Administration & Management* 21, no. 2 (2007): 70-76.

5. Note from author: For the purposes of this article, "young" and "new" are used interchangeably unless otherwise noted; it is an important distinction, however, that novice librarians may not, in fact, be young.

6. Elisa F. Topper, "Working Knowledge: Fighting Age Discrimination," *American Libraries* 35, no.10 (2004): 60.

7. Gwen Arthur, "The 'Graying' of Librarianship: Implications for Academic Library Managers," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 24, no. 4 (1998): 323-327.

8. Davis, 16; Lynch, Tordello, and Godfrey, 26.

9. Lynne C. Lancaster, "The Click and Clash of Generations," *Library Journal* 128, no. 17 (2003): 36-39.

10. Ibid., 38.

11. Rachel S. Gordon, "Get Over the 'Graying' Profession Hype," *LibraryJournal* 129, no. 1 (2004): 62.

12. Marylaine Block, "The Right Hand Knoweth Not," *Ex Libris: an E-Zine for Librarians and Other Information Junkies* (October 2004): http://marylaine.com/exlibris/xlib228.html.

13. Ria Newhouse and April Spisak, "Fixing the First Job," *Library Journal* 129, no. 13 (2004): 44-46.

14. William K. Black and Joan M. Leysen, "Fostering Success: The Socialization of Entry-Level Librarians in ARL Libraries," *Journal of Library Administration* 36, no. 4 (2002): 3-26.

15. Ibid., 8.

16. Ibid., 44.

17. Markgren and others, 76.

18. Ibid., 75.

19. John N. Berry III, "Memo to Baby Boomers," *Library Journal* 129, no. 10 (2004): 12.

20. Melanie Chu, "Ageism in Academic Libraries," posting to *NEWLIB-L*: *The Discussion List for New Librarians* (May 10, 2007): http://www.lahacal.org/newlib/.

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http://southernlibrarianship.icaap.org/content/v10n02/chu_m01.html.