

# Studying Library Technicians' Professional Lives Using Life History

**Abstract:** Within the libraries and other information organizations, paraprofessionals have taken on ever more important roles. Given the prominence of paraprofessionals in the LIS workplace, their organizational roles and career paths are understudied. Using life history methodology, this study will address this gap in the LIS literature.

**Résumé:** Au sein des bibliothèques et autres organismes d'information, les paraprofessionnels assument des rôles de plus en plus importants. Compte tenu du nombre de paraprofessionnels dans le milieu des BSI, leurs rôles organisationnels et leurs plans de carrières demeurent sous étudiés. À l'aide d'une méthodologie du cycle de vie (*life history*), cette étude comble un vide dans la littérature des BSI.

## 1. Introduction

In modern libraries, there have always been professional and nonprofessional roles; however, until 1955 in the United States and 1962 in Canada, nonprofessional training was provided by the hiring library ("Summary of Information" 1970). This changed with the development of library technician programs. In Canada, the first program was developed in Winnipeg, Manitoba, at the Red River Community College in 1962. The programs developed quickly across the country and by 1977 there were 29 programs (Angel and Brown 1977). The Canadian Library Association (CLA) took an early interest in the development of these programs. Through its "Guidelines for the Training of Library Technicians" (Marshall and Munro 1972), the CLA sought to define the role of library technicians. Although the Guidelines provided a definition for emerging technicians' roles, the exact duties a library technician *should* do were often debated in the professional literature (e.g., Astbury 1969; Bjorgo 1969). Since the emergence of formal library technicians training programs, the organizational roles of technicians have changed. Increasingly, paraprofessionals have been performing tasks traditionally associated with librarians – such as cataloguing and reference (Courtney 2001; Han and Chaudhry 1999; Ivey 2009; Johnson 1996). Yet, there are still attempts to articulate the roles of technicians (Davidson 2009), and examine how the quality of technicians' work differs from that of librarians (Courtney 2001; Cox and Meyers 2010). In addition, the organizational tensions between librarians and paraprofessionals are examined, although only from the point of view of librarians (Fragola 2009).

The organizational roles and career paths of library technicians are understudied in the Library and Information Studies (LIS) literature. Using life history methodology, this study will address a gap in the LIS literature. This paper presents the life histories of three Canadian library technicians. The intent is not to articulate a "typical" library technician career path, but to document the experiences of three library technicians. Life history was chosen as the methodology for this study as it offers researchers the

opportunity to explore how the lives of individuals interact with institutions and their own societal context, as well as giving a voice to the underrepresented.

## **2. Life History as Methodology**

Life histories take as their foundations the life stories of their participants. These stories recount the life experiences of participants, but they are not the focus of life history research. The purpose of this research becomes clear when these life stories are studied within their historical contexts (Goodson and Sikes 2001). The intention is not to tell some ultimate truth about the human experience, but to draw in “readers to the interpretive process and [invite] them to make meaning and form judgments based on their own reading of the ‘text’ as it is viewed through the lenses of their own realities” (Cole and Knowles 2001, 11). The role of the researcher, therefore, is to provide an initial lens through which the reader enters into the life history. This places the researcher in a position to “discursively [co-construct a] journey of discovery, new meaning and new knowledge” (Labaree 2006, 128) with the life history participant. The researcher/participant relationship, therefore, has a central and primary role in the development of life histories. The life history researcher does not simply ask questions, but often, when appropriate, shares her own experiences with her participants to facilitate knowledge construction. Traditional researcher-participant boundaries can, therefore, be blurred. The intention behind this boundary-blurring is not to cause the participant any harm, but “to elicit information that will assist in developing a contextualized understanding of human phenomena and experience” (Cole and Knowles 2001, 30). The stories of participants, therefore, must be treated with care, sensitivity and respect. Following Tierney (1998), the role of the researcher in the presentation of life history narratives is to “create the conditions in which individuals [can] claim [their] voice” (56). Methodologically, this presentation moves “us toward a newer understanding of reality, ourselves, and truths” (56).

The use of life history methodology in LIS research is limited. Labaree (2006) argued in favour of using the methodology as a way to contribute new ways of understanding the relationships between libraries and their patrons. Although addressed to practitioner researchers, Labaree’s call to use life history methodology could also apply to LIS scholars. Searches of Library & Information Science Abstracts, Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts, and Library Literature and Information Science Full Text all found that life history was not listed as the methodology used in any research studies. Connaway and Powell (2010) only mention the method as one of many qualitative methods available to librarians and LIS research. As Cole and Knowles write: “[life histories are] about comprehending the complexities of a person’s day-to-day decision making and the ultimate consequences that play out in that life so that insights into the broader, collective experience may be achieved” (Cole and Knowles 2001, 11). It is hoped, therefore, that this study will bring insight into the lives of important members of the LIS community. This insight will shed light onto the complexity of libraries and information agencies as organizations and provide a voice to the underrepresented in LIS research.

### **3. Method**

The three participants for this study were all graduates of library technician diploma programs in Canada, they were all women, and they each had over 20 years of experience as a library technician or related professional position. As life histories rarely rely on random sampling, participants were selected based on their experiences as library technicians. Each participant was interviewed three times. The interviews built upon data gathered from previous interviews in addition to focusing on a specific area of interest to the study: personal and career history, early work experiences, and organizational role. Because the purpose of this study is to document the lives and experiences of three library technicians, the stories presented here use the participants' own words. Following Tierney (1998), the researcher did shape the presentation of narratives into coherent stories to facilitate knowledge construction. Life history analysis works on multiple levels. First, a portrait or profile of the subject is created. Next, the deeper themes and patterns that shape and texture the history are examined so a deeper understanding of the subject can be gleaned. During the analysis at the second level, the overall historical context of the subject's experiences is considered. As life histories are co-constructed narratives, the participants were asked to review the stories for accuracy and to ensure that they felt that their anonymity was protected. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Board.

### **4. The Life Histories of Three Library Technicians**

The life histories of the three participants have many commonalities, but also many differences. During the 1970s and early 1980s, when the participants in this study were beginning their library technician careers, Canada was experiencing an economic recession that impacted library funding sources at all levels – government, universities, and businesses. In addition, technology became a focus of many library technician education programs and work experiences (Weihs, 2008). Each library technician's story presented here is influenced by, or reflects, these historical, economic and technological contexts. Renee (all names are pseudonyms) worked at a series of temporary positions before leaving technician work completely for six years – later returning to work as a library assistant in a public library. Rebecca decided to pursue her technician's education to help support her family. She worked briefly for a special library, then as the Director of Library Services for a consulting company, normally a position held by a professional librarian, then eventually opened her own information management company. Lastly, Nancy's story recounts her experience as a library technician before her decision to return to school for her Masters of Library and Information Science.

### **5. Renee – Public Library Assistant**

We don't work very closely with the librarians on a day-to-day basis. We have one librarian at our branch, and that's typical. She said at a recent meeting the role of library assistants was very hotly debated. She was incensed because the other librarians were saying that librarians were obviously better than library assistants. I had heard that kind of stuff before so it wasn't that much of a surprise, but it is kind of disappointing.

## **6. Rebecca – Information Management Specialist**

I started out as the *only* library tech in the company. I was moved from the local branch library technician position to the corporate director of library services position in just a few years. I don't think they knew what they had in me. I think they thought they had someone who would do as she was told. They hired me, in part, because I was less expensive than a librarian.

## **7. Nancy – Librarian and Former Library Technician**

When I applied for my library technician diploma I knew about the MLIS, but I didn't have my degree and it just seemed like such a long haul. It just seemed kind of insurmountable. I loved the technician program! It was wonderful. After I graduated, I got a job at an educational resource centre. But, I really didn't see where I would go from there.

## **8. Conclusions**

The purpose of the study was to provide a voice to an underrepresented group in the LIS literature – library technicians. The life histories presented here represent only three experiences of being a library technician, yet they provide insight into larger issues of librarian-library technician relationships and the different career paths and roadblocks for people with library technician diplomas. Given the recent changes affecting libraries, understanding the organizational roles and lives of technicians will help librarians and LIS researchers to comprehend the complexity of libraries and information agencies as organizations. The life history method provides a voice to underrepresented populations and offers insight into their lives and sheds light on the historical context of library technicians and their interactions with information. Here, the method was used to provide insight into the lives of people who work in libraries and help users search for, retrieve and make sense of information, but whose experiences are often underrepresented in the LIS literature.

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