Person or Place: Rhetorical Construction of Librarian and Library by the Information Profession Community (Paper)

Abstract: The rhetorical construction of place plays a central role in librarians' identity repertoires. As librarians construct their professional identity they use the rhetorical device of metonym to refer to themselves as the "library." This metonymic slippage allows librarians to lay claim to the library as their exclusive professional domain.

Résumé:

1. Introduction

Librarians have an important social role. How librarians conceive of and enact this role is greatly influenced by how they construct their professional identity. Public perceptions of librarians, however, are tied to the outdated understanding of librarians as keepers of the books (e.g., OCLC, 2005). Public perceptions of libraries, in contrast, continue to improve, especially in times of economic recession. Libraries are seen as a valuable social institution and a place for people to access information (OCLC, 2010). The connection between the library and the professional identity of librarians appears to be direct and uncomplicated, for, as Barlow (2008, p. 314) stated: "What other profession shares the same name with the building in which they work?" And, to extend Barlow's question, what other profession works for an institution as well-regarded by the public as librarians?

However, as this paper will argue, the connection between the library and librarians' professional identity goes beyond simply sharing a name with the building in which most librarians work. Instead, the library holds a central place in librarians' identity construction. Dent and Whitehead (2002) argued that due to social, cultural, and economic changes associated with the postmodern age, what society expects of professionals has shifted. As a result, professionals are no longer the unquestionably trusted and respected members of society they once were. Often, however, the institutions professionals work for are still well-regarded and trusted–a fact that is especially true for librarians. The connection between librarians' professional identity and the trusted institution of the library has not received a lot of attention in the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature. To address this gap, this paper, presenting findings from a larger research project, will explore how librarians use the library as a rhetorical device when they construct their professional identity.

2. Place, Professional Identity, and the Library as Institution

The connection between professional identity and the physical space of a workplace has received some attention in the professions literature. For instance, Elsbach (2003) found that the depersonalization of the workplace could negatively affect a

person's sense of personal and social distinctiveness and status, while Rooney et al. (2010) examined how the meaning organizational members ascribed to their workplace influenced their response to organizational change. However, only a few studies have moved beyond the workplace as space in organizational members' identity construction. For instance, Larson and Pearson (2012) examined the connection between the location of work at the city or regional level and occupational identities, finding that geographical place played a large role in framing how their participants understood themselves. While van Vuuren and Westerhof (2015) illustrated how a workplace provided professionals with a sense of belonging.

In the LIS literature, the social significance of the library has received a fair amount of attention. As an institution, the library is the "embodiment of a collective intellectual heritage" (Mak, 2007, p. 209). It is considered to be a "unique place that facilitates the kind of concentration necessary for doing serious scholarly work" (Antell & Engel, 2006, p. 552) and is a place that is free of judgement, costs nothing to enter, and provides a safe environment for visitors (Alstad & Curry, 2003). Budd (2008) argued members of the public expect libraries to exist. Libraries are taken for granted and, as such, are "invisibly visible": "it's there but we don't pay much attention to it" (Budd, 2008, p. 39). In addition, the library as place has been the subject of study in LIS for some time. Clients' perceptions and experiences of libraries, especially in relation to improving them (Clark, 2015; Khoo, Rozaklis, Hall, & Kusunoki, 2016; May & Swabey, 2015; Regalado & Smale, 2015); the effect of digital technologies on libraries as a social space for community members (Baker, 2014; Houston, 2015; Söderholm & Nolin , 2015); and, examinations of the library as a third space, or a location for community interaction (Oldenburg, 1999), as a way to guide the development and design of libraries and library service (Elmborg, 2011; Elmborg, Jacobs, McElroy, & Nelson, 2015; Lin, Pang, & Luyt, 2015) have all been examined in the LIS literature. Much of this literature focuses on how clients (currently or potentially) use and conceive of library spaces. This literature reinforces that clients like and enjoy library spaces and the changing and highlights the evolving nature of clients' needs in relation to the library as a place.

In contrast to the abundant literature examining the library as place and institution, there is very little literature examining the role of the library in librarians' identity construction. There is some literature that connects librarians' popular image to the library. Radford and Radford (1997; 2001) argued the stereotype of the female librarian as an old maid was connected to librarians' role as guardians of the library; while the stereotype of the librarians as police officers was connected to how they control clients' behaviour in the library. Other studies have suggested the libraries as organizations have negatively influenced public perceptions of librarians because the public does not see librarians' work. As a result, the public has no "idea about what is going on in the information business" (Prins & de Gier, 1992, p. 117-118). There are, however, some studies that offer insights into the connection between the library and librarians' professional identity. For instance, Budd (2008, p. 43) described the library as an institution as the "product of [librarians'] thought, [their] creative constructions, and [their] exchanges." Barlow (2008) explored how academic librarians working in three different universities used the building, or renovation, of library buildings to communicate something about academic librarianship to clients. She argued the librarians in her study designed new library spaces in such as way as to "prove something about their professional worth" (Barlow, 2008, p. 303). Whether as a place of work or study, as an important social institution and public space, or as a product of librarians' work, these

studies highlight that the library is a vital component of librarians' professional identity. These studies, from both the professions and LIS literature, highlight the importance of place in professional's identity construction. The library, because it is both a place of work for librarians and an important social institution and public space, is a rich object for study in relation to the professional identity of librarians.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

A professional identity is a situated identity enacted, most often, in specific situations, such as in the workplace or when a person is performing certain roles. Professional identities help people answer the core questions of identity: "who am I?" and "how should I act?" (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). When professional identity is the subject of study, researchers are able to shed light on how people experience, enact, and make sense of their professional roles, workplaces, and professionalism (Dent & Whitehead, 2002). Watson (2002) suggested examining how people speak about what it means to be a professional sheds light on how people construct their professional identities. He argued professionals use language and ideas about their profession to achieve certain social purposes. Therefore, by examining how professionals use certain words or phrases in their writing and speech, a researcher can highlight how members of that profession construct their professional identity.

To examine how librarians' construct their professional identity, this study used a social constructionist inspired discourse analysis approach, developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987). Discourse analysis examines how people use language to account for themselves, events, and actions. Specifically, this study examined the identity repertoires, or discourses, librarians use when describing librarianship and themselves as professionals. Identity repertoires consist of contextually consistent language resources that social groups, such as a profession, use when they speak or write about their work or themselves as professionals (Wetherell & Potter, 1988; Edley, 2001). In other words, identity repertoires are the language resources a community uses to describe itself and its members. These language resources consist of shared words, phrases, and rhetorical devices. Traditional understandings frame rhetoric as explicitly argumentative or persuasive forms of communication. This study uses Potter's (1996, p. 106) understanding of rhetoric, as a "pervasive feature [of speech] . . . people [use when they] interact and arrive at understanding." In other words, rhetoric is a series of linguistic strategies people employ to account for themselves. These strategies are designed, although perhaps not intentionally, to create shared meaning amongst members of a group, such as a profession. The particular rhetorical device examined in this paper is metonymy. A metonymy is a figure of speech in which an object or concept is referred to not by its own name but by an attribute or object closely associated with it ("Metonymy," n. d.). In this study, librarians' metonymically slipped between "librarian" and "library." A key feature of the discourse analysis approached used in this study is that it not only explores *how* people use language, but *why* people use language to account for themselves. Therefore, professional identity is more than simply a description of the self in specific situations–it also serve a purpose, or function, and has different social consequences and implications as a result.

Discourse analysis is a particularly well suited methodology for the study of librarians' professional identity. Budd and Raber (1996) were early advocates for discourse analysis, especially as it related to studying LIS as a discipline. They argued

because LIS researchers and professionals primarily communicated through published literature, discourse analysis provided an ideal way to examine how LIS framed its core concepts. Although Budd and Raber limited their discussion to how LIS scholars wrote about information, their argument that LIS professionals primarily communicate through written materials still holds true. Email discussion lists, library industry journals, blogs and other social media were identified by public, academic, and college librarians as their most common sources of information about libraries and librarianship (OCLC, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). The identity repertoires and discourses of a profession create a community of like-minded people based on shared meanings. By focusing on how librarians describe their profession and the rhetorical place of the library in librarians' speech and writing, attention can be drawn to how librarians construct librarianship and their professional identity.

4. Methods

Three different data sources were used to examine the identity repertoires of librarians: journal articles aimed at professional librarians, messages posted to email discussion lists, and research interviews with librarians. The data sources were selected to ensure different professional contexts and perspectives were represented in the overall data set. All library sectors (academic, public, school and special), as identified by *The Future of Human Resources in Canadian Libraries* (2005), including Canadian librarians, were included in the study.

The journals aimed at professional librarians included in this study were:

- *American Libraries*
- *College & Research Libraries*
- *Feliciter*
- *Information Outlook*
- *Information Today*
- *Library Journal*
- *Public Libraries*
- *School Library Journal*
- *Teacher Librarian*

Articles, editorials, and letters to the editor from these journals were included in the study if they were published between 2010 and 2012 and addressed the topics of librarians, librarianship, professionalism, and/or professional problems. In total, 289 articles, editorials and letters to the editor were included in the final data set.

The email discussion lists included in this study were:

- CLA (the official email discussion list for the Canadian Library Association)
- ILI-L (sponsored by the Association of College and Research Libraries)
- LM_NET (dedicated to school library media specialists)
- MEDLIB-L (sponsored by the Medical Library Association)
- PUBLIB (hosted by OCLC and dedicated to public libraries and librarians)

Similar inclusion/exclusion criteria to the professional journals were used to determine which messages were included in the study. Over 800 pages of discussion were collected for analysis.

Sixteen interviews with working Canadian librarians representing all four library sectors were conducted. The participants were professional librarians from Alberta, Canada. Participants represented one of the four library sectors and had a variety of professional experiences and personal backgrounds. Topics covered in the interviews included the participants' descriptions of how they entered the profession, their work, their professional activities, and their thoughts on professionalism. All participants quoted in this paper have been given a pseudonym and identifying details have been removed. Ethics approval for this study was granted by a University of Alberta Research Ethics Board.

The goal of this study was to identify the language resources librarians used to describe themselves as professionals, with particular attention to how librarians used words and phrases relating to the library as a place or institution in their identity construction. The data was analysed using a three-step procedure:

1. Individual units of the data, such as an interview or journal article, were analysed. Attention was paid to how words or phrases were used, the context in which they were used, and the reasons they were employed.
2. Individual units were compared to other parts of the data to identify recurring context-depending patterns and omissions.
3. The assumptions and discursive function, or purpose, that underpinned these patterns were identified. (Taljia 1999; 2005)

Specific attention was paid to the rhetorical devices or strategies librarians' employed when they used words and phrases relating to the library as a place or institution in their identity construction.

4. Findings

The analysis of the data uncovered five identity repertoires librarians used when describing themselves as professionals:

- Insider/outsider repertoire
- Service repertoire
- Professionalism repertoire
- Change repertoire
- Advocacy repertoire

A common thread tying together each of these repertories was the strategic and selective use of a metonymic slippage between "library" and "librarian" in the text and speech of librarians. In other words, in specific contexts librarians used library as a synonym for librarian. However, as will be explored in the following sections, the discursive purpose of this slippage changed depending on the context.

4.1. Insider/outsider repertoire

Librarians' professional expertise was a focus of this repertoire. Broadly, librarians identified information as their area of expertise. This expertise gave them an insider status. This status was supported and validated when clients recognized librarians' information expertise. When clients failed to adequately acknowledge librarians' expertise, librarians positioned themselves as outsiders. This had the discursive effect of limiting how librarians performed their professional roles and their ability to help clients. Discursively, librarians connected their expertise to the library as a place and as an institution. In other words, although they identified as experts in information in all of its forms, the enactment of this expertise was largely limited to the library. Library-related knowledge, such as subject headings and cataloguing rules, were referred to as "arcana" (PUBLIB 2010, post to email discussion list) only librarians truly understood. This specialized understanding extended to books, databases, and certain library-related technologies, such as ebooks.

The insider/outsider repertoire was marked by the repeated use of library as a synonym for librarian: "Libraries are definitely moving outside their walls" (Bjorner, 2012, p. 16). This metonymic slippage had the effect of conflating the librarian with the library. Therefore the activities of librarianship and the expertise of librarians were discursively positioned as the library's activities and expertise. The library was the physical proof of librarians' expertise and work: "I'm proud of what I've done. I'm–it's . . . tangible–a lot of the things I do are intangible. [The library] is tangible. That is something people can grab on to and I can say . . . 'I did this'" (Anna, public librarian participant). A consequence of this slippage was librarians' role in the library was overlooked. Meaning the library could appear to operate without the work and expertise of librarians: "I'm just facilitating access to [the library]. I'm not the person that [my clients] need to speak with–they can talk with anybody at [the library]" (Sharon, public librarian participant). An important effect of this slippage was librarians were able to apply the positive cultural associations of the library as an institution to themselves: "The library is very much a part of my life and when you reject the library, I feel you are rejecting me" (LM_Net 2012, post to email discussion list).

4.2. Service Repertoire

The service repertoire focused on the service activities librarians provided for their clients. Through the act of providing services, librarians positioned themselves as dedicated, caring, and responsible professionals. In this repertoire, librarians also slipped between library and librarian in their text and speech; however, the function of this slippage was different than it was in the insider/outsider repertoire. In the service repertoire, librarians became agents of the library: "The library as warehouse for books worth sharing. Only after that did we invent the librarian. The librarian isn't a clerk who happens to work at a library. . . . The library is a house for the librarian" (PUBLIB 2011, post to email discussion list). It is via the library that librarians can offer clients' service. The library is where librarians and their services belong.

In addition, the library itself was a service librarians offered their clients: "At the heart of what we do . . . is we share. . . . what does that mean? It's materials, it's expertise, it's space, it's ideas, it's creating that space for people to be in, so that's the heart of what we do" (Emma, public librarian participant). In other words: "Librarians

provide [the] 'service' of the library" (Christofle, 2012, p. 52). The library was a physical manifestation of librarians' service. It was the sum of their efforts: "Libraries are about service–not books. Information where & when you want it with librarians as professional guides" (MEDLIB 2010, post to email discussion list). In this usage, the physical space of the library was irrelevant to the services librarians offered. As long as a librarian is providing service, there will be a library. In this sense, the library belongs with the librarian: "Of course, I use 'library' loosely here as I don't just mean physical space but a program that teaches our students the value of seeking information and using it appropriately, the joy of passing hours reading and the correlation between reading and retaining more and more information" (LM_Net 2011, post to email discussion list).

4.3. Professionalism Repertoire

The metonymic slippage between library and librarians identified in the other repertoires was absent in the professionalism repertoire. Instead, the focus of the professionalism repertoire was the qualities that made librarianship a profession and librarians professionals: "when I say I do library work, I mean I use all the skills that I gained through my professional education as a librarian" (Olivia, special librarian participant). In this repertoire, the library was the end product of librarians' professionalism.

Here, the library was positioned as a tool librarians could use to further their professionalism and showcase their professional status to clients. Librarians credited their professionalism with making the library a well-regarded public institution: "The calm exterior of the library is what it is because . . . of the profession [sic] work to make it effective in ways that remain hidden to most people. As with many professional level degrees the complex training results in a mastery that is deceptively smooth on the surface" (ILI_L 2010, post to email discussion list). Librarians' professionalism, in other words, allowed the library to appear to function as a well-oiled machine, or tool, that clients could use to meet their information needs.

In addition, the library was positioned as a tool librarians could use to enact their professionalism and professional values. It was through their professional judgement and skills that librarians were able to create libraries that met the needs of their clients. One interview participant, Nathan (public librarian), used the metaphor of the library as tool repeatedly in his speech: "I am the library. . . . [if I] deliver an iPad [presentation] which . . . will help kids . . . navigate digital environments . . . that's the value. The value isn't that it might get them to come to the library. The value is in what I'm doing." Nathan's professionalism was evident not just in how he provided the service of the iPad presentation, but in the reasons for delivering the presentation. Nathan did not require the library to act like a professional. Instead by acting like a professional, he metaphorically became the library. Through his professionalism, he became the tool through which his clients had their information needs met and through which they could see the value of librarianship. Without his professionalism, however, the library-as-tool had no value.

4.4. Change Repertoire

The change repertoire had two main discursive functions: to highlight shifting professional roles and to position librarians in relation to changes occurring outside the profession. The metonymic slippage between library and librarian identified in the

insider/outsider and service repertoire was also present in the change repertoire, although it was largely confined to the published literature: "Libraries that can achieve flexibility will be better adapted for the future" (Bell, 2010, p. 38). Unlike the insider/outsider repertoire, the function of this slippage was not to transfer clients' goodwill for the library onto librarians, nor did it serve the same function as it did in the service repertoire, namely to discursively limit the work of librarians to the library. The function of the slippage in the change repertoire was to transfer the professional qualities of flexibility and adaptability towards change librarians were expected to have to the library as an organization. As a result of traditions and norms, organizations can be reluctant to embrace change that will help ensure their future survival (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Therefore, by discursively transferring the qualities of flexibility and adaptability to the library, not only would librarianship survive as a profession, but the library as an organization, the place librarians' work was discursively tied to, would also survive.

The role of the library was also expected to change. Many librarians spoke and wrote about the need to remove themselves from the library to better meet their clients' information needs: "Kids don't shlep to the library to use an out of date encyclopedia. . . . You might want them to, but they won't unless coerced. They need a librarian more than ever (to figure out creative ways to find and use data). They need a library not at all" (PUBLIB 2011, post to email discussion list). In this example, the librarian's expertise and skill was now the draw to the library for children writing a report for school, not the resources, and by extension the library. For the library as a place to remain relevant, the flexibility, adaptability, and expertise of the librarian had to be highlighted.

4.5. Advocacy Repertoire

In the advocacy repertoire, librarians highlighted their desire to ensure non-librarians understood the value of librarians, libraries, and librarianship. This repertoire was focused on specific actions librarians could take to ensure librarianship's value was recognized, including simply providing high-quality service to clients. Both services and the profession were the objects of librarians' advocacy activities. Librarians pursued advocacy activities to communicate the value of libraries, librarians, and librarianship in an effort to improve public perceptions of the profession and its services.

When services were the focus of the advocacy repertoire, librarian and library, or librarians and libraries, were used interchangeably in the text and speech of librarians. This was not because the primary location for services was the library. Discursively, librarians were the library and the library was librarians. In the following quote, the "we" referred to is libraries, not librarians. It is the library that is sending a message to its users, not the librarians: "I think [named library] is a leader within the profession. I know we are. We are well ahead of what many libraries are doing with community network. We truly are a leader in that regard" (Emma, public librarian participant). In a similar manner to the service repertoire, the function of this language choice in the advocacy repertoire was to highlight the role of librarians as service providers and the library as the primary tool they use to provide service. However, in the advocacy repertoire it also served as a reminder about the importance of librarians, and the services they offer via their libraries, to their communities.

This metonymic slippage, however, disappeared in the language used by librarians when they spoke and wrote about advocating for librarianship as a profession.

Instead, librarians and the library were no longer one and the same: "Remember, you are marketing your expertise, as well as branding the Library and what it can offer" (MEDLIB 2010, post to email discussion list). Unlike the example described above where "we" referred to a library, here the library is referred to as "it" and the expertise of the librarian is something that should be promoted separately from "what it can offer." The function of this separation in this part of the repertoire was to shift public perceptions of the profession away from stereotypical images and reaffirm librarians' professional skills and expertise.

5. Discussion

Place, meaning workplace or the geographical location of work, plays a large role in framing how people understand their occupational and professional identities (Elsbach, 2003; Rooney at al., 2010). Place allows professionals to create contextualized and localized version of their occupational identities (Larson & Pearson, 2012) and can provide professionals with a sense of belonging (van Vuuren & Westerhof, 2015). The library is more than a place of work or a cultural institution for librarians. It forms an important building block in their identity construction and provides answers to the central questions of identity: "who am I?" and "how should I act?" (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). The metonymic slippage between library and librarian throughout the data, and even its absence in some of the repertoires, functioned, in part, as a way for librarians to transform their workplaces into their exclusive professional domain. By discursively slipping between their professional title and their institutional affiliation, librarians laid claim to their workplace in a way that makes it uniquely theirs. The library acted as a symbol for librarians' professionalism and dedication to service and change. As a symbol, the library represented who librarians were, i.e., they were dedicated and flexible service professionals, while the skill and expertise they used to run the library was a demonstration of how, as professionals, librarians act. The slippage between library and librarian had the additional function of excluding the work of paraprofessionals and other library staff from the running of the library. Without the skill and expertise of librarians there would be no library.

Budd (2008, p. 39) argued the existence of libraries is taken for granted by the general public. As a result, as institutions, libraries are "invisibly visible." As highlighted in the insider/outsider, service, advocacy, and change repertoires, librarians were concerned about not having their expertise and professionalism recognized by clients and the general public. In essence, librarians were also concerned about being "invisibly visible." In the insider/outsider repertoire, for instance, librarians used the metonymic slippage between librarian and library to directly draw on the positive cultural associations of the library as an institution; however, an unintended consequence of this rhetorical device was the work and expertise of librarians was ignored. Libraries, as a result, could appear to function without the skill and effort of librarians.

In contrast, in the professionalism and advocacy repertories, librarians highlighted that the library is the product of librarians' professionalism and skills. In these repertoires, the metonymic slippage between library and librarian was largely missing from librarians' text and speech. Instead, the library became a tool librarians used to demonstrate their professionalism. This finding is supported by Barlow's (2008) exploration of the connection between librarians' professional identity and library buildings. She argued the librarians in her study designed their new library spaces in such

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a way as to "prove something about their professional worth to all who might listen" (Barlow, 2008, p. 303). Librarians discursively commit a similar act when they slip between library and librarian when referring to themselves. They use qualities associated with the institution of the library to highlight librarians' professional attributes.

6. Conclusions

This study highlights how librarians rhetorically used the library in the construction of their professional identity. It examines the role a place like the library, which serves as both a workplace and a cultural institution, has in the identity construction of the professionals who run them. The pervasive nature of the metonymic slippage between librarian and library in librarians' text and speech illustrates that although librarians do share the "same name with the building in which they work" (Barlow, 2008, p. 314), their connection to the library goes beyond this surface identification.

For librarians, the library is more than just a place of work or a social institution. When librarians strategically slip between library and librarian when describing themselves and their profession, they illustrate that the library is central to their professional identity construction. The library they are referring to is not their workplace per se, but the institution of the library. When librarians describe themselves as the library, they are drawing on cultural associations of the library as an institution. Like libraries, they are the embodiment of cultural heritage and intellectual thought; they facilitate serious scholarly work; and they provide low-cost, judgement-free help. By discursively slipping between their professional title and their institutional affiliation, the library becomes a symbol for their librarians' dedication to service and change. In some strategic instances, by rhetorically separating their work from the library, librarians are able to highlight that the many positive cultural associations of the library are the product of their own highly skilled labour and professionalism. In these instances, by not slipping between library and librarians, librarians are able to lay claim to the library and make it their exclusive professional domain. As this study demonstrated, the library is not just a place or an institution for librarians. It is a professional domain. And, as a professional domain, libraries are places where librarians create communities, both for their clients and for their profession.

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