THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LIBRARIANSHIP

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and H. Stephen Wright

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Dedications

To my husband, Stephen R. Spencer, with all my love,
and eternal thanks to the many friends and colleagues
who have encouraged this project along the way.
– *Lynn Gullickson Spencer*

For my Dad—the best scientist, researcher
and writer I've ever known.
– *Leanne VandeCreek*

To Ralph Papakhian (1948-2010), who questioned everything.
– *H. Stephen Wright*

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Introduction

H. Stephen Wright

When the editors began soliciting contributions from colleagues for this volume, the initial reactions tended to fall into two categories—one small, the other much broader. Some librarians questioned the whole notion of "the psychology of librarianship"; what, they wondered, could psychology have to do with a field as notoriously exacting as ours? But the most frequent reaction, by far, was a rueful remark about the speaker's colleagues: "You could devote the whole book to the people I work with!" was a typical response.

Indeed, is it even valid to talk about a "psychology of librarianship" beyond the rather mundane and unremarkable issue of personal interactions in the workplace? As a librarian who recently retired after a career of almost thirty years in academic libraries, my answer is a definite yes. Although I started in the library profession with admirably lofty notions of the role of libraries in a civilized society, I came to feel that much of what librarians did was driven, at least in part, by psychological factors. The insatiable drive to collect human knowledge in all its manifestations undoubtedly has psychological components. Library administrators become keenly aware of this when they ask their bibliographers to weed their collection; the almost reflexive resistance to weeding directives is intense and almost palpable. Library collections must, of course, be cataloged in order to be useful and accessible, and this vital aspect of library work attracts people who are often dismissed by their own colleagues

as obsessive-compulsive (a characterization that probably reflects how intimidating cataloging procedures are to the non-cataloger). Libraries are essential to an enlightened society, but their continued existence reflects the power of psychological impulses within the professionals who devote their lives to libraries.

Every librarian has encountered, and grappled with, the stereotype of the librarian: a mousy, awkward, introverted individual who shushes library users when not absorbed in the task of rubber-stamping due dates in books. In this volume, Ellen Symons examines these stereotypes in detail and finds them to be far more diverse and nuanced than one might suspect. Many other professions, of course, suffer from their own stereotypes, but librarians seem uniquely sensitive to them and often react with irritation when a book or film includes a "typical librarian" as a character. Beth Posner analyzes the psychological defense mechanisms, such as overcompensation, that librarians deploy in response to stereotyping; she argues persuasively that we can and should respond in more conscious and effective ways.

Confronting stereotypes inevitably raises questions about what motivates certain people to seek careers in the library profession. Are some of us simply born to be librarians—endowed from birth with personality characteristics that give our library careers a sense of inevitability? The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality inventory is quite popular among librarians, many of whom can recite their four-letter MBTI type as quickly and fluently as other people can reveal their astrological signs. Does the MBTI really reveal why one librarian excels at cataloging while another revels in the constant interpersonal activity of a reference desk? Lynn Gullickson Spencer offers a clear, balanced critique of this popular tool and explains its utility as well as its pitfalls.

Bob Wolverton marshals some truly formidable research to explore why many people choose librarianship as a second career; not surprisingly, he finds that psychological needs often compel this career change, and these needs often outweigh financial considerations (including the considerable investment of time and money in the acquisition of a master's degree in library science). Yet we cannot make generalizations

about what attracts people to library work. Anyone who works in the field has undoubtedly noticed that younger professionals entering the field today are quite different from the newly-minted librarians of the pre-Internet era. These differences are often profound and must be acknowledged and addressed if librarians of different generations are to work together successfully.

Librarianship is often perceived as a quiet, genteel profession, free of the stresses and competition of the private sector, but librarians are as susceptible to stress as anyone else. As Joan Schuitema reports, catalogers feel overwhelmed by the vast paradigm changes in bibliographical control—particularly the advent of a radically new cataloging standard, Resource Description and Access (RDA). Becky Yoose considers the elevated stress and anxiety caused by rapid advancements in library technology; her research reveals some fascinating contrasts to the stereotype of technophobic librarians. Ruth Mirtz offers a possible path away from stress and anxiety via the metaphor of resilience.

It is tempting to view libraries simply as buildings filled with their inanimate collections of books and other objects under the dispassionate control of library professionals, but the reality is that people—fallible, vulnerable people—are inextricably woven into the identity and functions of any library. Caitlin A. Bagley and Lilia Murray offer an exhaustive study of the deleterious impact of addiction on libraries, demonstrating powerfully that addictive diseases spare no stratum of society and no profession. We often comfort ourselves with the notion that only "problem patrons" affect libraries negatively, but librarians themselves can also be addicts. The relatively recent phenomenon of internet addiction is particularly relevant to libraries, as they are computer-rich environments in which both staff and patrons are exposed to risk.

However, we should not view the study of psychology in librarianship as something mired in negative emotions. Remaining cognizant of psychological factors can have a positive, constructive on all aspects of library work. Information literacy, once a novel and ill-defined concept, has all but supplanted the traditional practices of bibliographic instruction in academic libraries; Michelle Dunaway, in her essay on

the social psychological aspects of critical information literacy, asserts that our expectations of students in information literacy programs must be fully informed by awareness of social implications in order to avoid perpetuating outdated hierarchical pedagogical models. Samantha Hines shows how librarians can make effective use of prospect theory (an outgrowth of decision theory) to make more rational decisions and help libraries and their patrons transition to a post-print model. Elin O'Hara-Gonya shows us how greater awareness of psychology can enhance reference services in academic libraries by allowing librarians to respond appropriately to the mental health issues sometimes hidden behind seemingly ordinary reference inquiries. Finally, Barbara Weeg's study of "flow"—an experience that many of us have had without fully realizing it—shows us how we can structure our work to enhance this experience to increase our motivation and productivity.

Of course, this book is not the final word on the role of psychology in librarianship, and it is not intended as such. Rather, it is an attempt to raise awareness of the vast and neglected element of our work and start a conversation about it. Libraries have already gone through enormous changes and paradigm shifts since the start of the digital era, and we are not yet done. Information technology continues to evolve at an ever-increasing pace, political and economic upheavals threaten our traditional funding models, library patrons no longer view us as the gatekeepers of knowledge, and the very definition of a library is constantly questioned. We cannot cling to the traditional models of librarianship and expect society to conform to our expectations; it is imperative that we evolve. As Bradford Eden so aptly puts it in his concise essay on the conflict between the need for organizational change and the inertia of long-term employees: *we can't wait any longer.* The time for considering the psychological implications of librarianship is now.