

Emily A. Scott. The Problem of Subject Bias: A Study of Collection Development Bias by Librarians with Secondary Subject Degrees. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in LS degree. April, 2010. 20 pages. Advisor: Robert Losee.

The potential bias on the part of librarians with a secondary subject degree is explored as it appears in the library catalog through collection development. The number of books in a given library in a specific subject area is compared to determine if any bias exists in librarians with a Ph. D. A slight bias is detected as there often is a greater percentage of books in the subject area chosen by the librarian with the Ph. D. but it is concluded that further study is needed.

Headings:

Academic degrees

Book selection -- evaluation

Collection development -- evaluation

College and universities libraries -- Collection development

Ethics

THE PROBLEM OF SUBJECT BIAS:
A STUDY OF COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT BIAS BY LIBRARIANS WITH
SECONDARY SUBJECT DEGREES

by
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Introduction

Academic libraries making hiring decisions often choose to hire reference or collection development librarians who have both a Masters of Library Science degree and a Masters or Ph. D. in another subject area. This is particularly common if the hired librarian will be acting as both the liaison to a department and collecting the materials for that subject area. The second subject degree serves to legitimize the librarian to the department that he or she is working with as well as give the librarian a deeper understanding of the subject to aid in reference questions, research consultations and selection of materials. Having a second Masters degree or a Ph. D. also brings with it the assumption that the librarian deeply knows that subject area, making him or her especially qualified to select in that area. However, the question remains whether or not that assumption is based in verified fact.

One of the big potential problems with a librarian with a second Masters degree or Ph. D. is the huge potential for bias in selecting relevant materials. To earn their second degree, the librarian had to have studied one particular aspect of their subject area in great detail and write a thesis about it. This in-depth research into a topic of great interest to the librarian can create a bias towards that specific research area as they select resources. A bias will create a stronger collection in the research area of the librarian, rather than the strengths of the department or library as a whole. A bias towards one's subject specialty can have both positive and negative effects. It is,

therefore, very important to observe whether or not such a bias exists. This study purports to examine whether or not such a bias might exist and hopes to provide caution for librarians with a second degree and academic libraries who are hiring liaison and collection development librarians. Taking all of this into consideration, I hypothesize that librarians with subject degrees exhibit a bias towards their research area in the materials that they select.

Literature Review

The relative merits and potential negatives of the second Masters degree has been vigorously debated in the literature for academic libraries and for school libraries, however no one has chosen to back up their arguments with a research study and empirical data. Most of this literature has been arguments from practicing librarians defending their own situation. In his article "To Degree or Not to Degree" Jean-Pierre Herubel argues that a secondary subject degree is vital to the success of an academic librarian because the faculty and other researchers will not take them seriously otherwise¹. He follows himself up with an article defending having a subject Ph. D. degree in addition to a MLS². Glenn McGuigan finds based upon his own personal experience that having an MBA is important for enhancing business knowledge and

¹Jean-Pierre V Herubel. "To 'Degree' or Not to 'Degree': Academic Librarians and Subject Expertise." *College and Research Libraries News* 7 (1991): 437.

² Jean-Pierre V Herubel. "The Ph. D. Librarian: A Personal Perspective." *College and Research Libraries News* 7 (1990): 626.

contributes significantly to the librarian's development of interpersonal skills³. Several studies have been conducted about librarians' opinions of secondary degrees and the necessity thereof, such as the study conducted by Jennifer Mayer and Lori Terril in their article, "Academic Librarians' Attitudes about Advanced Subject Degrees⁴." They conducted an online survey of practicing academic librarians to determine the attitude in the field about whether or not a second Masters degree is necessary. They concluded that it depended on many different "factors including individual career goals and local institutional culture"⁵. Others have written similar papers, such as Katelyn Angel's 2009 "Squeezing Out Specialists." The problem is continually discussed but no study could be found that looks at bias in collections that were selected by librarians with secondary Masters degrees⁶.

A more popular way to study bias in the literature is through the study of self-censorship and how librarians may or may not be, whether consciously or not, censoring themselves as they make selection decisions. The only related study found on collection development bias is a Masters paper by Eric Gumbel at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His study titled, "Ethics, Bias and Collection Development in Triangle Area Academic Libraries Through the Lens of Abortion Rights," researched the occurrences of texts in four different library collections that was

³Glenn S McGuigan. "The MBA and Academic Business Librarians: More than Graduate Education for Subject Specialists," *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship* 13: 3, 405 - 417

⁴ Mayer, Jennifer, and Lori J. Terril "Academic Librarians' Attitudes about Advanced Subject Degrees." *College and Research Libraries* 66.1 (2005): 59-73.

⁵ Mayer, Jennifer, and Lori J. Terril "Academic Librarians' Attitudes about Advanced Subject Degrees." *College and Research Libraries* 66.1 (2005): 59-73.

⁶Katelyn Angel "Squeezing Out Specialists." *American Libraries* 40.5 (2009): 39.

slanted in a specific direction towards the abortion issue⁷. Based upon the numbers of books on either side of the issue, Gumbel concluded that in such an academic environment there is a liberal bias in terms of books on abortion rights in the libraries he studied. His methodology shows a successful method for how to test a similar problem.

As in the realm of bias in collection development, there are a lot of opinion pieces in the literature discussing self-censorship and the problems surrounding it. There are many opinion pieces in the literature discussing and debating the problems of self-censorship. In her piece, "Are We Really Infallible at Book Selection?" Allan Pratt argues that some sort of bias is always there because humans are always biased⁸. He says, "Every collection is biased by *somebody's* value judgments. It is nonsense to pretend otherwise."⁹ In her article, "A Dirty Little Secret," Debra Whelan argues that collection development librarians are self-censoring materials that they know are going to bring up a huge controversy and storm¹⁰. They just do not want to deal with all of the problems that including the book in the collection is going to bring. Tatiana Weinstein argues in her article, "Why your MLS and LTA Matter," that the degree that really matters is the MLS and LTA degree because the focus is not on knowing the specific subject matter that one is collecting in, but knowing how to select and what kinds of resources are going to be the most useful and relevant and full of the kind of

⁷Erin C Gumbel. *Ethics, Bias, and Collection Development in Triangle Area Academic Libraries Through the Lens of Abortion Rights*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: U of North Carolina SILS, 2006.

⁸ Allan D Pratt. "Are We Really Infallible at Book Selection?" *Library Journal* 4 (1995): 44.

⁹ Allan D Pratt. "Are We Really Infallible at Book Selection?" *Library Journal* 4 (1995): 44.

¹⁰ Debra Whelan. "A Dirty Little Secret." *School Library Journal* 55.2 (2009): 27-30.

information that is necessary¹¹. Ken Coley did a study that would test to see if school librarians were censoring themselves by studying the titles that are contained within the school's online public access catalog. In his article, "Moving Toward a Method to Test for Self-Censorship by School Library Media Specialists," Coley concludes that self-censorship is practiced by a large number of the librarians whose online public access catalogs were studied¹². This study uses similar methodology to what will be employed in the proposed study, showing a successful method and valuable answers. Despite a scant amount of literature on the subject, a methodology has been identified and some possible solutions to the problem given.

Qualifications

I am a second year School of Information and Library Science student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a particular interest in collection development, specifically in academic libraries. I have had three years worth of experience expertly navigating a large variety of online public access catalogs for both my previous jobs and the UNC SILS program. All of the data is readily available from the libraries' OPACs and free online resources, such as the US News and World Report.

¹¹Tatiana Weinstein. "Why Your MLS and LTA Matter." *American Libraries* 36.9 (2005): 57-8.

¹²Coley, Ken P. "Moving Toward a Method to Test for Self-Censorship by School Library Media Specialists." *School Library Media Research* 5 (2002).

Methodology

This study will attempt to answer the research question by examining the online public access catalogs (OPAC) of 15 academic universities who employ a librarian with a Ph.D. in a subject other than library or information science. To choose which universities to include in the study, the US News and World Report's Best Colleges 2010: National Universities Ranking was consulted¹³. Each university's library on the list was searched to determine whether or not they had any librarians with Ph.D.'s on staff. The searching strategies included searching the library's webpage for "librarian Ph.D." or "new librarian" as well as checking the list of subject specialists, which often included a brief biography of the librarian, including their prior education. After finding a librarian who fit the requirements of the study, the OPAC record for their dissertation was located at the university where they received the degree to find the subject headings assigned to the dissertation. If there were no subject headings assigned, the librarian was excluded from the study and the search continued. If there was at least one subject heading assigned, the librarian was included.

Once all the data about the librarians were gathered, the OPAC of the library where they worked was examined. The OPAC was evaluated for the number of books held by the library within the specific subject headings that the dissertation of the librarian with a second subject degree had. That same OPAC was also evaluated for the number of books in the broader subject heading area. Those numbers will be compared to the number of books held in the same library within the same subject areas but with

¹³ "Best Colleges 2010: National Universities Rankings" Online. Available. <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/national-universities-rankings/page+2>. February 23, 2010.

different specific subject headings. To determine which books deal with a particular subject for the purposes of the study, each book will be evaluated based upon their Library of Congress subject headings that were assigned to them when they were placed into the collection.

For the purposes of this study, a librarian with a second subject degree is a person employed by the library in a reference, liaison, or subject specialist capacity who has both a Masters of Library Science degree or a Masters of Information Science degree and a Ph. D. in another subject not library and information science, such as English, French or geology. For the purposes of this study, “subject specialty” is defined as the subject that the librarian received their Ph. D. in. All of the selected materials that are being considered for this study are materials that have records in the library’s OPAC, and therefore excluding any materials that cannot be searched for from within the online catalog. For this study, “exhibit a bias” is defined by three components: first, that there will be more books covering their particular subject specialty; second, that there will be a statistically significantly fewer books in the other subject areas that they are the liaison to; or three, an overwhelming number of books in the subject areas that they are the liaison librarian for.

The study includes 15 colleges and universities. The schools have been chosen by virtue of their rank in the US News and World Report National Universities Rankings¹⁴. This list was followed down from rank number one forward to rank 40.

¹⁴ “Best Colleges 2010: National Universities Rankings” Online. Available. <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/national-universities-rankings/page+2>. February 23, 2010.

Each school was chosen because it could be determined that they did in fact have a librarian with a Ph. D. on staff and that the subject headings of their dissertation could be found. If there was no librarian with a Ph. D. on staff or if it was impossible to determine the school where the Ph. D. was acquired or the subject on which the dissertation was written, the librarian was skipped and another librarian with a Ph. D. was looked for. If the university had no others, the next university was examined.

To analyze the information an excel spreadsheet was created to hold all of the pertinent information at once. From there, the data will be analyzed to determine whether any bias on the part of the collecting librarian with a subject degree can be seen in the data. Specifically, a much greater number of materials in that librarian's subject specialty than in all of the other subject in which they collect in and are the liaison for will indicate a bias towards that subject area. If the other subject headings have a significantly higher number of books than the subject specialty area, then it could be an indication that the librarian is overcompensating for an inclination towards a bias in favor of their subject specialty. If there is no real difference in the number of books in each subject, then there is either no bias or the bias has been well compensated for and is not present in the collections.

Limitations of the Study

Several factors limit the depth and accuracy of the study. The first limitation is the small number of libraries to be studied. There are a large number of college and research libraries in the United States and a greater number of libraries studied would lend greater confidence in the outcomes. Second, a in-depth look at the budgeted amounts of money for each subject and how they are used would shed more light on a possible bias in subject specialists or explain how collecting is actually undertaken at the university and lending more weight to the data and showing that it is not a bias at all. Third, assigning Library of Congress Subject Headings is a judgment call on the part of the cataloger and are being trusted wholly in the study. A more in-depth look at how each library assigns the subject headings might reveal more about the data. Additionally, the collection development policies might show whether the number of books in a subject reflects the librarian's bias or the dictates of library policy.

Results

			Librarians with Ph. D.			Librarians without Ph. D.		
Librarian	University	Ph. D. Subject	Books under Ph. D. Subject Headings	Books under broader Subject Headings	Percentage of Ph. D. SH in broader SH	Books under Ph. D. Subject Headings	Books under broader Subject Headings	Percentage of Ph. D. SH in broader SH
1	A	History	24	273	8.79%	7	143	4.89%
2	B	Theatre and Drama	188	752	25%	312	1489	20.95%
3	C	Chemestry	13	230	5.65%	14	540	2.59%
4	C	Musicology	34	384	8.85%	12	313	3.83%
5	D	Anthropology	15	120	12.50%	16	82	19.50%
6	D	History of Art	7	610	1.14%	22	942	2.33%
7	D	Arabic						
		Literature	7	136	5.14%	4	95	4.21%
		Religious						
8	E	Studies	66	170	38.82%	26	286	9.09%
		History and Literature of Ancient Israel						
9	E		2	90	2.22%	2	107	1.86%
10	F	Bioethics	136	1093	12.44%	487	2064	23.59%
11	G	Chemistry	39	182	21.42%	88	430	20.46%
12	H	Theology	26	371	7%	47	997	4.71%
13	I	German	13	190	6.84%	31	834	3.71%
		History/Art						
14	J	History	9	191	4.71%	19	216	8.79%
		French						
15	K	Linguistics	9	114	7.89%	6	187	3.20%
		Wildlife and Fisheries						
16	L	Science	22	220	10%	7	159	4.40%
		History - African						
17	M	Studies	50	108	46.29%	60	109	55.04%
18	N	Education	52	126	41.26%	28	65	43.07%
		American						
19	O	History	5	147	3.40%	20	75	26.66%
		English and Comparative						
20	P	Lit	5	58	8.62	21	306	6.86%

Analysis

Overall the data shows that those libraries which have a librarian with a Ph. D. in a secondary subject field selecting materials are more likely to have a larger percentage of books in that librarian's subject specialty than libraries where the materials are selected by someone without a subject specialty. Thirteen of the twenty libraries with subject specialists with advanced degrees had a higher percentage of books in that subject than at a library without a librarian with a subject degree, where only seven libraries without librarians with Ph. D.'s had a higher percentage of books in that specific subject. These percentages range from as little as 2.2% of the books in that subject to as much as 46.29%. For the most part, the two percentages in the same subject heading area are generally within five percent of each other, which is a slight, but noticeable difference. This data alone does not necessarily point to a subject bias on the part of the librarians with Ph. D.'s, but it does cause one to wonder if this would remain a relative constant with a larger set of data.

In the thirteen libraries where the percentage of books is higher for the librarians with degree, eleven are above five percent and two are above ten percent. While five to ten percent is not a very large number, the trend seems to steer towards a slight bias that is showing up in the catalog towards the subject in which the librarians got their degree. The two percentages above ten percent were significantly high at 38.82% and 21.42%. The corresponding percentage to the 38% in a library without a subject specialist is a mere 9.09%, a very large discrepancy. The corresponding percentage to 21.42% is much closer at 20.46%. The enormous discrepancy in the former percentages would seem to be merely an anomaly, although the small data set would encourage a more in

depth research study before it can be truly declared an anomaly. Overall the data seems to point to a slight subject bias exhibited by the librarians who have a Ph. D. in a separate subject to library science.

The more disquieting aspect of the data concerns the number of situations in which the percentage is greater than 10%. Seven sets of percentages are greatly over the five to ten percent of the rest of the data. In the subjects of education and History – African American studies are in the forty percent range with a spike to 55%. When two or three subject headings make up almost fifty percent of the number of books in an area, it would seem to indicate a neglect of the subject by the selector. Interestingly, in these two subjects the percentage of books chosen in the subject area by the librarian with a Ph. D. is less than the percentage chosen by the librarian without a subject specialty.

Conclusions

Overall the data points to a slight subject bias exhibited by the librarians who have a Ph. D. in a separate subject from their degree in library science. Given the larger number of situations examined wherein the librarian with a subject degree had a larger percentage of books in their collection on their specific subject specialty than the percentage of books in the library where the selector had no subject degree it seems clear that the subject librarians who have secondary subject degrees have considered a larger number of books on the subject of their degree to be essential to the completeness of their library's collection. As the percentages of both degree chosen and non-degree chosen are relatively close to each other, varying only by several degrees, it is clear that

the selectors with the secondary subject degrees have not chosen an excessive number of books in their secondary subject. Indeed, it is clear that the librarians with second subject degrees have chosen a greater number of books in that particular subject based upon their greater understanding of the subject and a familiarity with the books themselves rather than a wish to increase books that they could potentially use to continue their research interests or as a deliberate means to encourage students to studying a subject they found interesting. Given the variety of the hard numbers between the institutions being compared, it is equally clear that the selecting librarians are rigorously following their library's collection development policy's and taking into consideration the wishes and research focuses of the department that they are selecting for.

It is important for selecting librarians and subject/liaison librarians to be aware of the issues and problems that surround the secondary subject degree concern because it reveals useful information about how selection works to a degree. Subject librarians should use any knowledge they have of a subject to help them in evaluating any item that they are considering for inclusion in the library, in addition to their skills and knowledge as librarians. Actually using a book helps a librarian to get an idea of how easy it is to use as well as how complicated the language and concepts are to understand. It is also easier to truly get a feel for a source when engaged in a real search for information, rather than for an invented excuse. This understanding can help a librarian to make more discerning choices about which books would supplement and enhance the library's collection.

This study also points out one of the negative aspects of having a secondary subject degree, particularly a Ph. D. in a secondary subject: the potential bias. Having a much more intimate knowledge of the contents of books, particularly those that helped that particular librarian a great deal during their dissertation, might make it very difficult to choose which books would be best for their library, as there might be the temptation to get all of those which proved invaluable in the past. However, acknowledging that bias is a potential problem that is likely to sneak up on a selector when they are not paying enough attention and resolving to guard themselves against it and to be aware of the potential for bias should hopefully be enough to help a contentious librarian and selector to compensate for such a bias. After all, every librarian has certain subjects they enjoy more, which has the potential to become a bias that affects the materials that they select. Whether or not a librarian chooses to get a secondary subject degree should be decided on a case by case basis depending on the type of library where they wish to work and the requirements thereof, until more research can be done into the various benefits and problems of the secondary subject degree and the potential for bias.

This study is a brief foray into the subject of subject biases. It has revealed that there is evidence of a bias towards the subject in which a librarian received their secondary degree that can be found within the library catalog of the library in which they work. An in-depth study is required to understand more of the intricacies and causes of the bias, but this study is a beginning and hopes to point to where more in-depth study of the subject is appropriate as well as giving an idea of what kind of results to expect. The results of this study suggest that librarians with a secondary subject

degree have specialized subject knowledge that might help in acting as a liaison to a department on campus, but is reflected as a bias in the online catalog towards their subject specialty.

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