SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF LIBRARIANSHIP
AS A PROFESSION –
THE COLOMBIAN PERSPECTIVE

Ruth Helena Vallejo-Sierra
Program Director, Information Systems and Documentation
Universidad de La Salle, Bogotá, Colombia, rvallejo@lasalle.edu.co

Abstract

This research is a first attempt towards providing insight into the social reality of librarianship, through a qualitative study of the ideas, significance, opinions, beliefs and attitudes that are generated around it. The study aims to unveil the perceptions that Latin American professional leaders, Colombian library science students, and high school students have about the profession. This project begins with a theoretical analysis of the notion of profession and the conditions that make it emerge. This is followed by an explanation of how professions have been conceptualized in social representations. Finally, this paper provides an analysis of social, historical, academic, and labor aspects of librarianship. Some of the results found are: there is no unique notion of librarianship and there are many differences in how it is perceived. Among high school students who can be considered potential candidates for library science education, there is no evidence of a concept of librarianship as a profession; they relate the profession exclusively to reference services in libraries. The groups that took part in this research furnished recommendations that include strengthening library science schools, professionalizing librarians, creating new channels of communication with high school students.

INTRODUCTION

Choosing librarianship for one's profession is the topic of preliminary research carried out during 2008 as part of the doctoral programme in Methodologies and Lines of Research in Library Science and Documentation at Universidad de Salamanca, Spain. The purpose of the initial proposal was to provide insight into the social reality of the profession, as it is represented in Colombians' knowledge, meanings, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes expressed about this profession.

This project emerged due to various reasons. On many occasions within her social circles, the author was asked to explain whether librarianship is a profession or not and why it is necessary to study in order to work in a library. Other negative comments relate to the stereotype of the librarian's image. Currently there is a

small number of students who choose library science as a major, as well as a significant number of permanent positions that cannot be filled due to the lack of qualified professional personnel. Finally, a more relevant issue may be how we perceive ourselves within our profession and how librarians value the profession.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This project starts with a theoretical analysis of the concept of profession and the conditions that make it emerge, based on constructions of social representations, and includes a review of historical, social, academic, and labor aspects of library science.

The historical and conceptual development of any given profession has been subject to not only academic conditions or the structures of knowledge but also to economic and social conditions. There are various authors who have referred to concepts of profession and especially to its developmental process, and they generally agree that the critical foundational role is played by society, not only in accepting the profession but also in needing it.

Some authors state that librarianship's sphere of activity emerged as an answer to a social need and not as an urge to seek answers to questions about reality as is the case in other areas of knowledge. Delgado[1] mentions that "*to do"* was more relevant than "*to think,"* and this initial orientation located librarianship within a non-scientific frame. As is well explained by Roggau,[2] it was necessary to preserve manuscripts, and in the Middle Ages to guard and rescue the record of the church as well as of classical antiquity. Later, during the Renaissance, the flourishing book production created a need for bibliographic control, and with the arrival of the Industrial Revolution, it was necessary to massively register all types of documents and facilitate access to information. Finally, the 20th century brought accuracy and rapidity in information processing, transmission, and communication by means of new technologies. Roggau believes that this "empirical" origin of librarianship, which lacked explicit theoretical grounds, constituted the basis for an image without academic prestige. Rather, it was an image of a responsible repeater of practices, and consequently, its association with occupation, not profession. Writing on education for librarianship in 1972, Jesse Shera stated:

> Library science, for the first time in its long history, is obliged to clearly formulate its role in the society, to creatively examine its intellectual grounds and to look at itself as a whole, as an integral system that serves man throughout his life, as an individual and also as a society member.[3] (p290)

In the socio-cultural context of librarianship, the evolution of the profession has been linked to the history of the book, access to culture, and to the development of information technology. The librarian has gone from the role of conservator and preserver to that of professional in the service of the community. As Shera saw it,

when it was decided to democratize the culture, the role became "to relate men with the information."

Some common stereotypes have emerged about the librarians' image (such as feminization of the profession), its social recognition, and its professional prestige. These facts are supported by a theoretical analysis of the history, professional development, and professional profile of librarianship in Colombia.

To study perceptions of librarianship, we can use the framework of social representation. Research using this perspective has integrated the social and psychological dimensions that explain the construction or reconstruction of the reality in diverse fields. The study reported here aims at understanding how social structures influence the development of library science representations and how previously constituted schemas influence new representations.

Knowledge of the social representation of library science is a path to understanding society's perception of this science as a profession: How that influences young people's selection of it as a profession, its professional status, its visibility, and its recognition. In turn, this understanding can provide new readings of the profession and reconstruct the social dynamics surrounding library science and can contribute to its professional re-positioning and strengthen its development.

THE COLOMBIAN CONTEXT

In Colombia, education for the profession, as elsewhere in the world, emerged from the universities, in short courses that focused on the technical management of libraries. An associated effect was that librarians' status and salary were oftentimes perceived as very basic. With time, the short courses have evolved into fully comprehensive degrees at the university level, making the outlook more positive. Librarianship as a career was recognized as professional practice when the Colombian government issued professional law, Act 11 of 1979.

In Colombia there are currently library science schools in the following universities: La Salle, Javeriana, Quindio, located in Bogota; Medellin and Armenia (Virtual). These are certified as high quality programs that grant a diploma in librarianship to comply with the law of professional practice. There are now also professional programmes in information science and information systems.

These days the panorama is more positive, when you consider the information provided by the Universidad Externado de Colombia about labor conditions and about trends in the demand for professionals based on employment indicators, unemployment, and income.[4] From these data, it can be concluded that the university programmes with better prospects for employment of their graduates are as follows: administration, library science, economics, and administrative engineering.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The general objective stated for this research was to understand the representations of librarianship held by information professionals in Latin America, and by Colombian library science students and high school students. Specifically, the objectives were:

- to describe the representations – knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values – that professionals, library science students, and high school students hold about librarianship, and
- to describe the different connections they make among these representations (knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values) and librarianship's realities (professional recognition, labor conditions, and professional visibility).

METHODOLOGY

The research process was carried out in several stages:

- first, selection of methodology, identification of the study population and the method for selecting members of each group, and design of instruments for data collection;
- second, data collection, and organization and categorization of the gathered information.

In order to study the social representation of librarianship, ethnography was considered as the method that would allow the researcher to understand how the subjects perceive librarianship as a profession. The aim was to unveil socio-cultural implications and meanings and from these to construct a new discourse. As part of this qualitative methodology, the criteria for selecting one participant and not another, were criteria of membership in groups that were familiar to the profession, rather than statistical representation. Two elements, adequacy and sufficiency, were taken into consideration.[5 (p135)] It is important for the selection to meet the criterion of adequacy for the purpose of the research, that is to say, the individuals comprising each group to be studied should be representative of the larger population of which they are members. The criterion of sufficiency requires that the groups or sources of information are familiar enough with the topic studied to answer the researcher's questions and clearly construe "social representation." The three groups that were formed were: library/information professionals, library science students, and high school students.

Ten professionals, presidents of various Latin American library associations, were selected in order to ensure quality responses and some level of homogeneity. Also, it was possible to have access to these individuals online. They were given a

virtual survey on such topics as their conception and vision of the profession, professional identity, and the social context.

Seven library science students were selected from different semesters in order to represent the student body. The group included some students who already had hands-on experience as employees of various libraries (it is important to note that in Colombia, it is common practice for librarianship students to work in libraries from their very first semesters).

A focus group was held, where the objectives of the study were discussed, and students were asked about their choice of the profession, challenges, opportunities, and their ideas about strategies to for re-positioning library science.

The selection of ten high school participants used the technique that Babbie[6] describes as non-probabilistic sampling procedure. In this process, a sample is chosen considering the knowledge of the population, its nature, and the objectives of the research. The topics of the interview with these students were: their choice of a future profession and factors affecting this decision; their relationship with libraries and librarians; and the subjects or contents of library science as a field of study.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

When trying to analyze the social representations constructed by the professionals, library science students, and high school students, it was necessary to explore different spaces of interpretation such as the ones constructed around knowledge about the profession and about professional "work," and about vocational decisions.

The analysis showed that social representations about librarianship as a professional choice are influenced by the following factors:

1. whether or not the respondent is part of the library science group;
2. relationship with libraries;
3. lack of social recognition;
4. persistence of the librarians' negative stereotype;
5. the image of the professional;
6. lack of professional consolidation and the reductionist practice of the profession related exclusively to the libraries;
7. lack information and communication;
8. low labor recognition and the lack of professional regulations.

Perceptions of working conditions revolved around low professional status, professional positions occupied by non-qualified personnel (professionals from a different discipline), uneven salary, the value the society gives information and libraries, the lack of a dynamic professional attitude, the use of the library only to

do homework, and inadequate professional development of the personnel in charge of the libraries, resulting in inappropriate service.

When discerning the complex reality that emerges from the social representations of library science as articulated by the three groups, we may say that it is determined by:

What do we know? We know that there is not only one conception of librarianship. There are various theoretical divergences within the groups directly related to it. By the high school students (potential recruits to librarianship), it is not perceived as a profession and refers exclusively to reference service in the library.
What do we believe, how do we interpret it? The main beliefs about librarianship are focused on considering it an occupation and not a profession. It is also believed that it is not necessary to have any professional development to be able to work in a library, since it is matter of only circulating books. It is clear that for all, the librarian's traditional image persists. There is a perception of the emergence of new stereotypes that relate professional practice exclusively to libraries and only to the format of printed books.

What do we do? Professional practice is characterized by low status, reduced prestige and inappropriate labor conditions.

The number of open positions is higher than the number of applicants, making job availability a decisive factor for those who have entered library work. Library science is not among the professional choices of applicants that have access to college education. This picture is discouraging, since solutions to the recruitment problem do not depend only on professional librarians.

The social reality demonstrates that studying library science is not seen as a professional option. It is associated with reading behavior, a particular personal profile, an occupation, and to the lack of knowledge of the profession.

The perception of librarianship as a feminine profession seems to have been overcome by the participants, since the perspective of gender was not part of their reflection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the results obtained, there were proposals for re-positioning the profession through the identification of different drawbacks which have been grouped into areas in order to be able to design the appropriate strategies:

Improve libraries

- Strengthen school libraries and professionalize the librarians who work in them. This change would aid the recognition and acceptance of the profession by this important sector, and would provide role models for students who might select librarianship as their future profession.

- Re-conceptualize the library and the construction of a professional practice in favor of social inclusion and access to information.
- Improve reference service in all the libraries by taking advantage of information and communication technologies and of course the appropriate professional development for those who render this service.
- Work on the recognition of libraries and on professional development for the human resources that administer them.
- Define specific strategies for librarians and the community in order to reconstruct a vision of librarianship in the perceptions of the profession, the users, media, and society.

Enhance professional profiles

- Librarians will be recognized as professional when they have the academic background, the updating level, and the personal profile in accordance with a profession of service.
- Library science schools should widen the communication channels of the profession as well as the sectors they address, especially with campaigns with the professional advisors in high schools.
- Library science schools will see the number of students increase in the years to come, although it does not necessarily have to do with their vocation.
- Re-define the professional profiles, since the ones constructed in the different schools have not covered the social environment.
- Raise librarians' educational achievement beyond basic professional preparation and undergraduate programmes through graduate studies
- Professionally develop librarians not only in their technical knowledge but also in their personal image and public relations.

Advocate for the field

- Develop specific strategies addressed to librarians and the community to change the image as an occupation.
- Re-structure the advertising programs of the profession to position it in the knowledge society.
- Look for new market opportunities for the profession in order to position it in the knowledge society.
- Carry out market studies on the need for information professionals.
- Undertake a project of professional re-positioning.
- Include a libraries program in the political agenda to guarantee professional improvement.

Recruit to the profession

- Understand the factors that attract prospective students towards a profession and integrate and highlight them within the communication process of the librarianship academic program.
- Include librarianship in career decision making. Determine interests and preferences within social interests, family traditions, psycho-economic factors, affinity, willingness, professional recognition, abilities and skills and redefine the channels to approach potential recruits.
- Unify the concept of library/information science in presentation to society as a professional career direction. The consolidation of library and information science is the only guarantee for the social status and professional recognition.

CONCLUSIONS

Librarianship is important to society, although in the so-called information society there is not adequate recognition of it as professional work. There is no understanding of the diversity of librarians' knowledge, the complexity of their social meaning and the dimensions of their work that influence the professional process. Those are some drawbacks present today and if those are recognized we can design strategies to improve the future. This affects us, since it is about recognizing whether society can visualize us or not as a profession. It is necessary to identify the reasons that link this profession to various sources of knowledge, in order to establish its real foundation and consolidate its boundaries. In other words, to thrive for the epistemological consolidation of the profession.

It could be suggested that the changes that have happened should not necessarily modify the foundation of library science but simply make it stronger. We should think then in terms of a unique theoretical position that allows us to identify clearly the characteristics and attributes that make us different from other professions and would also allow us overcome the concept of being just an occupation rather than a profession, or the recognition in some sectors and not in others.

The conclusions of this research are tentative and are limited by the qualitative methodology and the small number of subjects. Given the findings, it can be stated that perceptions of the library science profession raise questions about the need to look for a professional space and an identity in this new information society.

It seems that information has an obvious value in fields ranging from the educational, social, cultural, political, to economical. The current challenge is for library and information sciences to engage in a process of complementing each other, and in consolidation. As stated by Catrovo,

… the legitimacy of a profession becomes the relevance of their actions according to the expectations that society as a whole is facing the same ... against this background, the challenge is introduced to the profession suggests the possibility of knowing and interpreting the same reality to understand complex and changing issues in their various manifestations, to deepen the impact of social dynamics in this and in alternative dispute resolution.[7 (p9)]

It is necessary to react to a society that is demanding a change to help you solve latent problems such as access to information, democratization of knowledge, and information overload, where this really becomes a means to ensure the quality of life of the community.

It can be stated that the proposals aforementioned clarify the challenge that library science has in society. The findings point to a need for creating a clear and different identity for a profession that can have an impact on society and obtain social recognition. This can be possible if an appropriate plan is developed that takes into account all actors (society, professionals, students, employers and government), and is supported by other disciplines. The project reported here provides a preliminary analysis of social representations, but is limited and cannot be generalized. A more broadly based study would require not only different instruments for data collection but also a wider population. The final objective is to propose a planning model to provide an identity for the profession which includes a total strategic analysis of it, a proposal for construction of a new identity for the future. At this point it is necessary to consider the reach of the profession, its attributes, groups, essence and image, which can suggest individual and group strategies for change. A system to implement a re-positioning librarianship as a profession has to look for support in all sectors, and propose communication mechanisms that would involve all the relevant groups.

Ideally, the analysis of the profession should be done globally, from the reality of each country, although IFLA could assume leadership in structuring a plan of identity construction and implementation. Each society, in accordance with its development structures and its social representations, recognizes the professions it requires for its development.

It is expected that research of this nature would be greatly useful for understanding our library science reality. It could lead to actions to make the reality better. It is possible that in the end, there are more queries than answers which become the grounds for other research about librarianship as a profession.

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