

©1989 The Institute of Mind and Behavior, Inc.
The Journal of Mind and Behavior
Summer 1989, Volume 10, Number 3
Pages 301-302
ISSN 0271-0137

Librarians in Search of Science and Identity: The Elusive Profession. George E. Bennett. Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1988, 221 pages, \$25.00 hard.

Reviewed by Denis Gaffney, State University of New York, Health Science Center at Brooklyn

This volume appears to be a re-examination of the issues first explored in the author's doctoral dissertation, *Conventions of Subordination: An Interpretative Analysis of Texts that Define the Professional Identity of Academic Librarians* (State University of New York at Buffalo, 1987). The subtitle of the present volume, "the elusive profession," is a key to the nature of the problem explored in the work. Librarians have always had a problem explaining—to others and to themselves—just what it is they do, why it is valuable, and why they consider their work "professional." Of course, librarianship is not the only profession to have experienced this dilemma, which is a point the author neglects. In recent years, such professions as nursing and teaching have gone through similar identity crises.

The author feels that librarians have too eagerly embraced the identity of "information scientists," which has led to a renaming of the profession as library-and-information-science. Even the older label of "library science" demonstrates, he asserts, the need of librarians to associate their work with the greater respectability of the exact sciences, with their heavy emphasis on research. Information science, however, in its turn, proves difficult to define, often coming down to little more than the application of computer methods to library procedures—hardly the basis for constructing a professional identity.

Much of the argument of the book centers around a paper of Jesse Shera, a prominent library educator and theorist (Shera, 1983). In that paper, Shera recants his earlier championing of information science as a theoretical basis for librarianship. He emphasizes the service aspect of librarianship and the need for librarians to have a broad liberal education. Shera writes: "It follows that information science cannot qualify as a theoretical base for librarianship, and calling it bibliometrics or informatics does not alter the situation. We librarians must constantly remind ourselves that our concern is with sociological and psychological phenomena not physical objects and processes" (p. 386).

Bennett uses hermeneutics (the interpretation of texts) as a framework for his study, analyzing the textual presentations of librarianship in its professional literature for clues as to how librarians see themselves and the nature of their profession. He begins his survey fairly early in the twentieth century and brings it up to the 1970s. Views of librarians toward their profession are seen as "interpretive conventions." A con-

sistent pattern of attitudes of subordination and low status emerges, along with the continuing need to justify the professionalism of librarianship by reference to outside models of science and research. Concerns such as faculty status for librarians, the perception of librarianship as a woman's profession, and the need to distinguish clerical routines from professional work are traced through the literature.

The author's main conclusion appears to be one of agreement with Shera, i.e., that librarians have been wrong to merge their identification with that of information science. In doing this, they have lost touch with the humanistic and basically service-oriented and pragmatic aspects of their profession. The techniques of information science are just procedures that can facilitate and speed up library operations. They do not encompass the totality of what librarians do: making the information from our graphic records accessible to library users.

Overall, the author gives an excellent survey of librarians' attitudes toward their profession in the twentieth century. He has gone meticulously through the relevant literature and presents his points in a clear and direct fashion. A comprehensive bibliography is provided. The question of professional identity is always significant, and often stimulating and provocative. However, I question Bennett's choice of the hermeneutic framework for his arguments. I found it mystifying at times and often getting in the way of cogent points the author was making. I also wonder about the usefulness of presenting the introductory chapter and the summary in dialogue form.

The author neglects to take into consideration some recent developments in libraries that could have considerable influence on the way librarians see their work. Recent advances in telecommunications and the increasing use of microcomputers in libraries, especially in reference work, are causing profound changes in library operations. This is not just a case of procedures being taken over by machines, but a change in the way procedures are carried out and viewed by the professional. At the same time, certain aspects of the librarian's traditional role, perhaps overshadowed for a time, are being reinforced. With the growth of end-user searching of computerized information sources, librarians are advising people more and more on the most efficient and accurate way to get at the information they need.

While the author spends much time on the vicissitudes of library education over the years, he does not investigate the recent phenomenon of the closing of a number of library schools—some quite prominent—over the past few years and the declining number of graduating librarians. Is this solely a matter of economics and human resource needs? Does it arise from problems of professional status and identity?

In the end, this book poses more questions than it answers, admittedly not always a drawback in a work of this kind. However, I was not left with a very clear picture of what the author's image of a professional librarian really is. Perhaps a little more reworking and some expansion of the book's contents, along with a consideration of more recent developments, would have given the work a more finished and satisfying, a less dissertation-like, quality.

References

- Shera, J. (1983). Librarianship and information science. In F. Machlup and U. Mansfield (Eds.), *The study of information: Interdisciplinary messages* (pp. 379-388). New York: Wiley.