In Search of Shifting and Emergent Librarian Identities: A Philosophical Approach to the Librarian Identity Problem
À la recherche d'identités bibliothécaires changeantes et émergentes: Une approche philosophique au problème de l'identité bibliothécaire

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article soutient que si la conception classique et essentialiste de l'identité est attrayante par sa simplicité, elle ne rend pas compte de manière adéquate de la complexité de l'identité professionnelle ou individuelle. L'attrait de l'essentialisme en bibliothéconomie contribue à certains problèmes graves pour la profession tels l'exclusion et l'homogénéité sur les lieux de travail, les taux élevés d'attrition des bibliothécaires issus de minorités, l'exploitation et l'aliénation d'une main d'oeuvre sous-représentée ainsi que les stéréotypes. Cet article examine le paysage théorique quant à la question d'identité et propose une alternative plus appropriée de l'essentialisme, notamment la conception relationnelle de l'identité, et s'engage dans un argument philosophique pour l'adoption d'un compte relationnel comme fondement théorique pour la compréhension de la nature complexe, fluide et émergente de l'identité bibliothécaire au sein de notre profession dynamique.

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Abstract

This paper argues that while the classical, essentialist conception of identity is appealing due to its simplicity, it does not adequately capture the complexity of professional or individual identity. The appeal to essentialism in librarianship contributes to some serious problems for the profession, such as exclusion and homogeneity in the workplace, high attrition rates of minority librarians, exploitation and alienation of an underrepresented workforce, as well as stereotyping. This paper examines the theoretical landscape with regard to the identity question and proposes a more fitting alternative to essentialism, namely the relational conception of identity, and engages in a philosophical argument for the adoption of the relational account as a theoretical grounding for an understanding of the complex, fluid, and emergent nature of librarian identity within our dynamic profession.

Keywords

librarian identity; essentialism; relational identity; professional identity; philosophy of librarianship

Introduction

"Who am I?" is paradoxically one of the most intuitive and intimate questions a person can ask because, on the one hand, it embodies a thought that is tacitly grasped by any being with the capacity for self-reflection, and, on the other hand, it is one of the most difficult questions to answer, as can be gleaned from the centuries of philosophical disagreement on the topic. It is often the simplicity of the question that discourages care when pursuing an answer. This paper argues that librarians contemplating professional identity face this very danger of a lack of careful contemplation of the far-reaching consequences of improperly answering the question of "Who am I?".

While the scientific myth of the beauty of simplicity, perhaps best captured by the principle of parsimony (also known as Occam's razor), often infiltrates our daily contemplations of much more concrete matters, such as librarian identity, we contend that the simple answer in this particular case produces undesirable results. This paper argues that although much of the literature pertaining to librarian identity employs a supposedly straightforward conception of identity (the objectivist or essentialist approach), the essentialist notion of identity is not beneficial to librarianship, and, in fact, is actively harming our profession. We propose, instead, a somewhat more complex (and perhaps messier) conception of identity: the relational approach. This approach not only solves many of the problems created by the essentialist view but is also more reflective of the multifaceted and dynamic roles librarians occupy; this is the case precisely because one is not a librarian by virtue of an elegantly lofty job title or description, but rather by virtue of the numerous messy, complex, and unique relations that emerge through interactions between librarians and library users.

We argue that the tendency to view our profession through the lens of the essentialist conception of identity contributes in part to some of the major problems the profession faces today: the problems of exclusion and homogeneity in the workplace, the high attrition rates of minority librarians, and the exploitation and alienation of an underrepresented workforce. While, theoretically speaking, the relational conception of identity is not as parsimonious as the essentialist view, it nevertheless offers something essentialism cannot, namely: inclusion, acceptance, and a sense of professional autonomy that can only emerge within the context of an active pursuit of building and strengthening unique relationships between individual human beings with distinct strengths as well as needs.

Because the underlying assumption at the core of this problem is, in fact, a philosophical one, we must engage with the more abstract theoretical question of identity so as to be appropriately equipped to tackle the more practical issues of interest to library professionals. To this end, we introduce the problem with the ongoing search for librarian identity, then turn to a philosophical discussion of identity as we review the classical essentialist concept of identity, explore the theoretical problems with essentialism, and outline the philosophical grounding of relational identity, before illuminating the practical, and, as we will argue, often detrimental, implications our

essentialist conceptions of ourselves as librarians have had on the wellbeing of our profession.

Essentialism, Objectivism, Relationalism, and the Analogy Between Personal and Professional Identities

Essentialism is perhaps best characterized in modal terms (see Kripke, 1980; Marcus, 1967); essential properties of an object are those that the object *necessarily* has while non-essential (or contingent) properties are those the object could *possibly* (or accidentally) have, but need not have while still *essentially* remaining the same object. There are different types of properties that are characteristics or attributes of different kinds of things; for example, mental properties are attributes or characteristics of minds while physical properties are characteristics or attributes of physical objects. The diversity of types of properties encompasses characteristics descriptive of such ontologically diverse things as, among many others, games or sports (where the essential properties are often found in the core rule-set of the game), persons (where the essential properties are traditionally psychological in nature), and professions (where the essential properties are usually bound up with roles and professional duties or responsibilities).

Understood in modal terms, essentialism claims that for an entity to be what it is, certain properties must exist; without those properties, the entity is no longer that which it was when it had those essential properties. Non-essential properties are merely possible descriptions contingently attributed to the entity that do not characterize the entity *qua* itself, but rather only accidentally. For example, there is a set of core properties (perhaps some set of psychological properties) that made Albert Einstein *essentially* the *person* he was, without which Albert Einstein would not be Albert Einstein. There are also many other properties that can be used to describe Einstein, like his iconic hair or moustache, without which he would still be the same being (Albert Einstein). The latter properties, then, are merely accidentally or contingently descriptive of Einstein since shaving his head or moustache would not change the essence of who Einstein was.

Although our focus in this paper is on professional identity, the general logic of essentialist understanding of professional identity is analogous to the logic underlying objective identity (i.e., the diachronic identity of objects) and personal identity (i.e., the diachronic identity of persons). In other words, whereas essentialism about objects states that an essential property of an object is something that the object must necessarily have in order to remain the same object over time, essentialism about persons claims that some essential set of psychological characteristics must necessarily exist from one time to another for the individual to remain the same individual over time. Similarly, essentialism applied to professions picks out certain necessary roles, professional responsibilities, or traits without which the work being performed cannot be labeled with a particular professional title or designation.

We argue, most directly in the sections titled "Essentialism Is Not Beneficial to Professional Identity" and "Essentialism Is Detrimental to Equity and Justice Issues" where we critique of Bales (2009) and Bennett (1988) respectively, that understanding

individual or professional identity in objective terms (i.e., in the way one would identify objects) is the wrong approach. Moreover, this paper argues that while essentialist accounts of identity tend to make this leap from objective to individual identity, such a leap is unjustified; we propose the alternative relational account as better suited to questions of personal and professional identity.

Ontologically, persons and professions are certainly distinct kinds of things, but they are analogous by virtue of their common subvenient bases, which are the underlying objects responsible for the multiply realizable higher-level (or supervenient) properties.[1] Both the abstract notions of personhood or librarianship (or some other professional title or designation) are higher-level, emergent descriptions of certain human characteristics where personhood and/or librarianship *supervene* on the human beings who *are* person or librarians (in the case of persons or librarians, humans serve as the *subvenient* bases in such supervenience relationships). In other words, to be a person, a human being must display certain properties or attributes. The orthodox philosophical understanding of persons does not attribute personhood to human corpses, for example, and many accounts of personhood also exclude fetuses, neonates, and individuals in vegetative states (see Kant, 1785/1993) from sharing in this morally significant label. There is, of course, much disagreement and variability in the literature (e.g., Lenart, 2014, where I argue for the personhood of humans in vegetative states, while Singer, 2011, argues for the inclusion of some non-human animals into the moral sphere of persons). No matter how the label is applied, personhood is an abstract moral designation that supervenes on a concrete individual (generally a human being), who serves as the subvenient base for the supervening attribution by virtue of certain properties or characteristics that individuals possess. The essentialist approach targets some set of necessary characteristics an individual must be in possession of in order to qualify for the status of personhood, which, as we will argue, is an inappropriate way of describing persons or identifying them over time. Focusing on relationships instead, we propose, is a more appropriate way of defining and identifying persons.

Analogously, a profession is an abstract designation applied to a human being. While machines and automated production will continue to replace some tasks traditionally performed by humans, machines will not have professions. A profession, etymologically speaking, is a declaration of identity: the term "profession" is derived from the Latin *professiō*, meaning "open declaration, avowal, public declaration of one's person and property, public register of people and property, vocation or occupation that one publicly avows" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). In a very real sense of the word, a profession is an expression of a certain portion of a person's identity; one's professional identity, is, in fact, quite often an integral part of one's personal identity. For example, regarding the professional identity of nurses, Öhlén and Segesten (1998) explain that "[p]rofessional identity is viewed as an integral part of the nurse's personal identity (Carlsen, Hermansen, & Vråle, 1984), and the existence of a personal identity is a prerequisite for the development of a professional identity (Hermansen, 1987)" (p. 721). This is why

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[1] Supervenience is a technical philosophical term that refers to a relation between properties, where the underlying, lower-level (subvenient) properties are non-reductively responsible for the occurrence of higher-level, emergent (supervenient) properties.

humans can have professions, but machines cannot. This is also the reason we argue that professions, like personhood, are better understood in the context of relations rather than in objectivist terms, and why we begin our argument with a philosophical analysis of personhood and personal identity as a means of understanding professional identity.

By focusing on the distinction between personal identity and objective identity, we by no means suggest that these are the only types of identity or that any other conception of identity being utilized in the professional identity literature is automatically somehow essentialist in nature if it isn't relational. The reason we focus on the distinction between personal and objective identity is that both personal and professional identities are quite often essentialized, and, as argued above, there is a strong analogy between personal and professional identity. Therefore, by virtue of this similarity, we think similar identity criteria ought to be applied to both personal and professional identities. We, thus, argue that since the relational account has the most fitting criteria for the solution of the problem of diachronic personal identity, those same criteria are best applied to professional identity, and especially to the question of diachronic professional identity, which undertakes the tracking of professional identity through change (since librarian identity is in a state of continual evolution).

Just as there are many different approaches to the problem of identity (including different approaches to the question of professional identity), of which the relational approach is just one, so is there a plethora of relational accounts, some theoretically grounded in environmental philosophical approaches like deep ecology (see Leopold, 1949; Naess, 1973, 1989; Sessions, 1995) and others originating in postmodernism, as Ornstein and Ganzer (2005), in their paper titled "Relational Social Work: A Model for the Future" point out:

> There is not one relational model but a variety of approaches, the most prominent of which are relational conflict (Mitchell, 1988), mutuality and reciprocal influence (Aron, 1996), dialectical constructivism (Hoffman, 1998), and intersubjectivity (Benjamin, 1998; Ehrenberg, 1992; Ogden, 1994; Stolorow, Brandchaft, & Atwood, 1983). Other prominent theorists whose work is allied with this model are Jodie Messler Davies and Mary Gail Frawley (Davies & Frawley, 1994), Steven Cooper (2000), and Karen Maroda (1991, 1999, 2002). (p. 566)

Yet other relational accounts are grounded in the philosophy of mind, and more specifically the extended mind thesis (see Heersmink, 2018; Wilson & Lenart, 2015). In fact, arguably, relational accounts of self can be traced as far back as the Stoics (see Lenart, 2010).

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[2] The four main approaches to the problem of personal identity, for example, are (1) the psychological-continuity accounts (see Lewis, 1976; Locke, 1694/1975; Noonan, 2003; Parfit, 1971/1999, 1986, 2012; Perry, 1972; Shoemaker, 1970), (2) biological or physical accounts (see Olson, 1997; Williams, 1970), (3) narrativist views (see Schechtman, 1996), and (4) the anticriterialist counter position to the other three (see Merricks, 1998). While there are objectivist or essentialist versions of the first two types of accounts, narrativist accounts are largely relativist in nature.

We recognize the variety of approaches and the fact that there are differences between the numerous proposals given the multitude of fields within which such approaches arise. We also realize that, by virtue of these many differences, there is also inherent disagreement (or, perhaps more appropriately, inherent pluralism) within the relational approach as a whole. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, we only wish to point to this general theoretical approach to identity rather than focus on a particular tradition, version, set, or subset of the various theories available. The reason for this is that while more work in this area is both necessary and encouraged, we do not wish to lose the focus of the overarching argument in theoretical nuances and thus propose to move along with broader, more general strokes. We, therefore, only present a relational theoretical framework (and its feminist origin) as an alternative to a more orthodox theoretical framework, which too comes in many different flavours as, like its relational rivals, the general essentialist approach manifests itself in different forms and arguments depending on the tradition or subject area within which a particular proposal originates.

The Necessity of Knowing the Self?

We should begin by asking whether we even want to choose a method for identity formation. What good is a professional identity in the first place? There are, of course, benefits of knowing the self. Even a simple explanation of preferring the known over the unknown is one of them: "Whatever the theoretical arguments against identity as a coherent notion, experiencing an incoherent identity is not pleasant" (Brennan, 1996, p. 94). This simple argument is compelling, even if it merely appeals to the phenomenal experience of having an identity. It is unclear, however, if the benefits of having an identity are as evident in professional identity as they appear to be for the purposes of self-analysis of one's personal identity. Additionally, we don't require our personal identities to be shared among like groups and yet we often hear things like this:

> First, librarians must be grounded in a shared purpose and professional identity and establish a contextual framework for our own professional 'boundaries.' We cannot create an intersection with the knowledge and experience of others if we do not have an understanding of our own frame. (Belzowski, Ladwig, & Miller, 2013, p. 3)

Why does professional identity, as opposed to personal identity, have this requirement of being shared in a monolith, covering the whole group? And why is it so often considered a requirement to "know thy professional self" before any other actions in professional life can occur? Arguably, we derive a similar benefit from casting off the unpleasantness of the unknown with this shared professional identity, but what is the root of the requirement?

For professional identity and librarianship, this desire to solidify is so intertwined with the desire to be regarded as important or professional that it is virtually impossible to separate the two. It is not uncommon to see this desire stated outright: "Librarianship is not fully recognized as a profession. In order to gain the full professional recognition and autonomy that it deserves, librarianship must develop a new awareness and conception

of itself and its potential" (DeWeese, 1970, p. 2). This arguably elitist and vaguely desperate desire to be accepted and recognized has its own problems, but for the time being, let us take it at face value that this is a reason we, as librarians, need a shared professional identity.

Searching for an Identity

We are then faced with a circular problem: Are those drawn to the profession already of a certain identity or are we as a profession searching for one? If the former, and those of us drawn to the profession have a professional librarian identity inherently, then we should not be facing these struggles of self-identification. If the latter, then unfortunately we have not yet been able to find the professional identity that we are searching for, and so we go on, identity-less. The search for, or belief in, a natural, rigid identity lends itself to this self-fulfilling, essentialist circular logic; for example, in a paper on the common personality traits of academic librarians, Williamson and Lounsbury (2016) state that their "primary research goal was to identify personality traits aligned with the personal qualities or soft skills that represent important competences according to the library literature" (p. 127). If we can agree that personality is an expression of identity, then we can see this as an attempt to line up the two sets of planks between a person and their profession. The assumption with this research question is that there is a personality type that is perfectly suited to librarianship as a profession; the survey went on to discover that, lo and behold, librarians were just like the type they assumed librarians to be. In philosophical jargon, arguments of this form are viciously circular, meaning that the conclusion being proposed is also a premise in the argument itself; in other words, the very properties of librarian characteristics being measured are already assumed to be constitutive of librarian identity.

The circularity of some of the methods employed in the search for our professional identities may be in part responsible for our continual search for a shared, concrete librarian identity; the search for this seemingly elusive concept has been ongoing since at least the 1950s (e.g., Attebury, 2010; Bennett, 1988; Cravey, 1991; DeWeese, 1970; Ennis, 1961; Gorman, 1990; Martell, 2000; Plutchak, 2005; Prins, de Gier, & Bowden, 1995; Salamon, 2015; Shera, 1956) and continues in many library journal issues to this day (e.g., Pierson, Goulding, & Campbell-Meier, 2019). Nevertheless, the search for the properties that identify us as librarians desperately continues. While not all authors take the essentialist approach directly (see Brook, Ellenwood, & Lazzaro, 2015 on critical race theory, and Julien & Given, 2003 on social positioning theory), relational identity is very rarely taken up. Merely searching for the identity needle in the haystack tells us that most scholars believe in the existence of the needle. It is through this line of discourse that we are told to always be searching for our identity and are taught to yearn for a true professional essence. We must reflect here, though, on the results of this work: despite all the words dedicated to the search, there has not been much agreement on our identity, let alone the discourse on identity searching.

If Identification Pays, Why Haven't We Found an Identity Yet?

Our argument here is that, despite the perceived benefits of holding onto a fixed identity, such a beast does not really exist in that specific fixed way. The fixity comes at a steep philosophical price and is therefore often rejected on logical grounds:

> [Fixed identity] means that the often contradictory implications of difference identifications have to be papered over, and the result is often a refusal to think through certain ideas, dependent on certain identifications, past the point where their logical incompatibilities become apparent. So that while this refusal results in a stability of identity, it also results in fixed points, ideas we refuse to entertain because of the fixity they threaten. (Brennan, 1996, p. 94)

This papering over of differences can be seen frequently in the work that has been done on librarian identity, mostly in the repeated outcome that we continue to relitigate the issue. What other things can be discerned from the never-ending search for identity in LIS literature? Despite the reams of paper dedicated to this question, we argue that there has been a lack of analysis regarding what professional identity logically consists of; there have been many cursory reviews of librarian identity, but they seem to amount to nothing more than bullet lists of essential librarian traits and responsibilities, with little analysis of whether we even need to hold a fixed identity. There has also been a lack of analysis on differentiating between professional roles and professional identities and between identity and identification or perception.

This is not to say that the search in and of itself does not provide solace; it is understandable that we keep searching since letting go of attempts to identify in a concrete, fixed manner can result in some forms of cognitive dissonance, not to mention that the prospect of risking the loss of origin can be quite frightening and disconcerting. After all, if we don't know who we are, won't that undo everything? While we can, of course, look to postmodernism and post-structuralism to put us at ease with the notion that the self is not so concrete, it is nevertheless understandably difficult to pragmatize that. We argue that postulating relations as the building blocks of identity offers just as solid a grounding as, and perhaps even more fertile soil than, the postulation of essential traits. Adoption of the relational account encourages us to reflect on what truly makes up what and who we are, and leads to an honest observing and reporting on the self instead of grasping at straws (or, as it were, focusing on a fixed list of competencies). It is entirely possible that embracing this alternative model of professional identity will not significantly alter the day-to-day operations or workflow of a library (although maybe it should), but it is possible that it will reduce the hand wringing over our essential professional natures. Turning to the history of philosophy, let us reflect more broadly on these two conceptions of identity.

The Classical Concept of Identity

While the identity relation, as a classical logical concept, is quite simple, the application of the concept for the purposes of identification and re-identification of objects has resulted in centuries of philosophical debate; problems arise with the inevitable

introduction of temporality, which is an inseparable aspect of our physical reality. Further layers of complexity and difficulties spring from attempts to understand the diachronic identity of persons, and by extension, professional identity, which, as is the case with personal identity, must account for change over time.

The classical notion of identity views the concept as an equivalence relation, meaning that a thing is identical to itself and nothing other than itself. Classically, then, identity is both a reflexive and symmetrical relation satisfying the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals proposed by Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz (1686/1988). Leibniz's Law simply states that if x is identical with y then all that is true of x must also be true of y. In other words, any discernible differences in otherwise identical objects entail that the two objects are not actually identical. Logically, reflexivity just means that $x = x$, and symmetry simply states that if $x = y,$ then $y = x$.

Magicians often rely on their audience's inattentiveness when they produce a nearly identical object, such as a coin, in place of one that has been hidden, counting on the human inability to discern the minute differences. Philosophically speaking, however, the two coins, even if identical in every respect (shape, luster, year of minting, etc.), do not actually share all properties in common. Were the magician to reveal the sleight of hand and set both coins side by side, it would become immediately obvious that the coins cannot be identical, even if the only discernible property was a spatial one; the reasoning behind this assertion is that the same thing cannot be in two different places on the magician's table.

Objects, nevertheless, constantly undergo changes: everything in the universe is in constant relative motion, meaning that nothing is ever in exactly the same place we left it, and other properties also change through time (coins lose their luster, fruit rot, people age, etc.). The puzzle of identity, then, has to do with tracking change of the self-same object through time. This is what philosophers refer to as diachronic identity, or identity through time.

A third property of the classical identity relation, transitivity, helps to account for spatiotemporal change. Transitivity simply states that if x is identical to y at some moment of time $t1$, and y is identical to z at another moment in time $t2$, then, even if x doesn't exactly resemble $z,$ z nevertheless is identical to x. Logically, transitivity can be expressed as follows: if $x = y,$ and $y = z,$ then $x = z$.

Given such a clear understanding of identity, identifying and re-identifying objects through time should not be as troublesome as has proven to be the case. The mereological complexity of objects in our world, however, further muddles our intuitive grasp on identity through time. Mereology is the philosophical study of relations of parts to their wholes; the problem is that while parts themselves are also wholes, they in turn constitute other wholes. Some examples are individual cells being part of a single multicellular organism, the internet being constituted by individual servers, and a ship being composed of individual planks.

The Ship of Theseus Paradox

The latter example has, in fact, been central in philosophical discourse on the problem of identity. The ancient Greek historian Plutarch (ca. 99/1794) explains the ship of Theseus paradox, which characterizes the puzzle of identity just as vividly today as it did in Ancient Greece, thusly:

> The vessel in which Theseus sailed, and returned safe with those young men, went with thirty oars. It was preserved by the Athenians to the times of Demetrius Phalereus; being so pieced and new framed with strong plank, that it afforded an example to the philosophers, in their disputations concerning the identity of things that are changed by growth; some contending that it was the same, and others that it was not. (p. 63–64)

If we think back to the classical notion of identity, one solution to the puzzle is that the ship is, in fact, the same identical ship as the original vessel in which Theseus sailed. The reason is that at any moment in time, both symmetry and reflexivity are preserved: the ship as a whole is identical with itself and nothing else, even if the various constitutive parts continue to be replaced as time goes by. Moreover, by virtue of the property of transitivity, while there are gradual and continual changes to the ship's planks, the original ship is still the same ship as the vessel with one replaced plank, the vessel with one replaced plank is still the same as the ship with two replaced planks, etc. Transitivity ensures that the original ship during Theseus's time remains identical with the one on display during the time of Demetrius Phalereus, even if the latter no longer contains any of the original planks.

The puzzle, however, continued to capture the imagination of philosophers throughout the centuries, and further complications were unearthed in the ensuing philosophical debates.

> In the modern era, the case took on added interest, owing to a twist from Thomas Hobbes. Suppose that a custodian collects the original planks as they are removed from the ship and later puts them back together in the original arrangement. (Wasserman, 2017)

This more recent version of the puzzle can no longer rely on the classic definition of identity as a solution because, in Hobbes' version, we now have two vessels with identical structural integrity vying for the designation "ship of Theseus," but, by definition, both cannot be the same ship since one thing cannot be identical to more than itself. Moreover, even if the original, replaced planks were not weathered and rotten, and thus, if each corresponding plank on both vessels was indiscernibly identical to its counterpart, the spatiotemporal properties of each plank (and each ship as a whole) are certainly discernibly different since the ships occupy totally different spatiotemporal coordinates.

Essentialism and Objectivism

One solution to the paradox of the ship of Theseus is to determine what constitutes the essence of Theseus's ship. In other words, if one can determine what makes Theseus's ship uniquely his ship, then one can also determine which of the two, if either, is the actual ship of Theseus. If, for example, what makes the ship of Theseus essentially his ship is that it is constituted by the very same planks Theseus's shipbuilders assembled into Theseus's ship, then Hobbes's reassembled ship is Theseus's actual vessel. If, on the other hand, what is essential about Theseus's ship is that he sails it, then neither of the vessels is his ship. Many other essentialist proposals can be entertained, each entailing a different answer to the puzzle.

The essentialist solution to the identity puzzle works reasonably well for objects like ships, and, just like the ancient paradox, the essentialist approach to identity also has its origins in Ancient Greece. The Greeks realized that if the essence of a thing can be determined, then it can be used to solve other mereological problems; if one knows what some whole essentially is, then one can figure out how many parts of that whole can be missing or replaced before the whole ceases to be what it essentially is, or one can determine what parts are essentially constitutive of that whole.

This approach has thus also been adapted to thinking about persons and their identity through time. For example, in his function argument, Aristotle (ca. 350 BCE/1999) utilizes the essentialist approach in an attempt to determine what makes humans unique. An innovative feature of Aristotle's argument is that it not only aims to capture what makes something unique and therefore distinct from its constitutive parts, but the discovery of a thing's essence also reveals its function, and a thing's function can, then, also be used to discover its essence. For example, if the heart's function is to pump blood, then the heart is essentially a pump, and vice versa. This suggests that if the heart's function remains unchanged (that is, if it continues to pump blood), then its identity as 'your heart' would not change even if some or all the valves were to be replaced by artificial implants.

Aristotle settled on rationality as the essential property of human beings, a property that has permeated the theoretical landscape of questions of personhood and personal identity for millennia and has only been challenged fairly recently with the emergence of feminist criticisms of objectivist and individualistic accounts of personhood. We will turn to this shift shortly, but it may help to first illuminate some of the problems with the essentialist/objectivist accounts, which were, in part, the catalysts for the shift. There have been numerous proposals throughout the history of the philosophical problem of personal identity, and a great majority of them do tend to fall into the essentialist schema. For example, John Locke (1694/1975) argued that a person is essentially their memory and proposed the memory criterion as a means of tracking a person's identity through time. While Locke's proposal faced opposition even during his own time and memory-based accounts of personhood and personal identity are all problematic, the neo-Lockean approach to the problem of identity continues to be the current orthodoxy (Dennett, 1981; Noonan, 1998; Nozick, 1981; Parfit 1971/1999, 1986). Biological accounts of personhood, most notably Olson's (1997, 2003) animalism, have attempted

to undermine the psychological accounts favoured by neo-Lockeans. Nevertheless, both broad approaches to the problem of personal identity run into the same difficulties, namely that in an attempt to essentialize and individuate, they both end up neglecting or downplaying salient components of personhood and personal identity.

The psychological accounts almost entirely discount a person's embodiment—their integral relation to their own physical body and to their environments—while the biological accounts dismiss the importance of psychology and psychological continuity. Moreover, neither account takes into consideration the impact other people have on our identities as persons. While there have been continuous efforts to salvage such accounts, the problems are insoluble precisely because of what the essentialist schema inevitably leaves out.

First, the essentialist account fails to capture the complexity of a person's identity. While a librarian, for example, would need to be characterized by his or her unique function or role in order to fit into the logic requirements of the essentialist approach, not every librarian needs to be characterized by that particular function, nor must a single librarian fulfill that particular function at all times. Second, the essentialist approach tends to objectify a person or a profession, which can lead to stereotyping because focus on some single property or set of properties fails to acknowledge other salient aspects of a person or profession. This, then, is also why the emerging voices of relational identity offer a much better starting point for contemplations of both personal and professional identity.

Relational Identity

The relational approach to identity is closely connected to the relational approach to moral philosophy, which originated as a feminist critique of orthodox objectivist, individualistic moral theories, most notably utilitarianism and Kantian deontology. Carol Gilligan (1982) criticized Lawrence Kohlberg's (1958, 1981) developmental stage theory, which identifies six distinct stages of moral development, as being male-oriented. Gilligan put forward her own moral theory, the ethics of care, as an alternative to Kohlberg's hierarchical approach. While it is not clear that Gilligan is correct in identifying two distinct, gendered moral voices, she certainly recognized and pointed to distinct processes of moral reasoning; her criticism of what has come to be known as the justice perspective has become the grounding for relational moral accounts, and arguably, by extension, relational accounts of identity.

All moral theories must offer an account of rights and obligations; without such an account, a moral theory lacks efficacy. Utilitarianism, a consequentialist theory, for example, grounds rights in the principle of utility, which states that actions are right if their outcomes or consequences promote happiness. According to the principle of utility, we, as moral agents, have an obligation to maximize utility, which entails helping people satisfy their preferences, since preference satisfaction maximizes happiness. We all, in the utilitarian account, have a right to preference satisfaction unless the satisfaction of our individual desires reduces overall utility—meaning that individuals with malevolent preferences do not have a right to having their desires satisfied.

In the ethics of care approach, on the other hand, rights and obligations are grounded in the care relations between care-givers and care-recipients, defined generally. Nel Noddings (2002) expands on Gilligan's idea of the ethics of care by elucidating the connection between needs and rights within the care relations that constitute the moral grounding of the ethics of care. Noddings argued that care relations are special in that the needs of a care-recipient within the context of such morally significant relationships can become rights, obligating the care-giver to satisfy those needs within the bounds of the relationship and the care-giver's own capacities.

> A common domestic example of a right-generating care relationship is the feeding ritual pet owners engage in with their pets. Pets communicate their needs in various ways (i.e., by barking, by meowing, by guarding the food dish, etc.), which often idiosyncratically emerge in the context of a given household. The pet owners, because they are immersed in these respective contexts, have the ability to both recognize and satisfy the needs being expressed by their pets. The need for food becomes a right to be fed. Once the need the pet is communicating is recognized, the pet owner has a moral obligation to enter into a care relation with the pet and aid in satisfying his or her need (especially since it is often the case that the pet cannot get the food for itself). This care-relational bond is not a one-time occurrence, but an ongoing dependency. (Lenart, 2014, p. 291)

Care relations are usually very complex and can be both symmetrical (those within the relation often occupy the care-giver as well as the care-recipient roles) and asymmetrical (as in the example above).

Relational accounts of identity that are grounded in care ethics necessarily endow the concept of identity with moral properties. Hilde Lindemann's (2010) proposal is an excellent example of how identity is intimately rooted in moral considerations. Lindemann argues that there is a kind of care-giving, which she calls holding in identity, that is best provided by those closest to us (those who are intimately entangled in various, complex care relations with us). Since this holding in identity is grounded in care relations, identity itself and how we relate to others is ethically flavoured in this view, meaning that holding others badly in their identities is morally wrong. Lindemann (2010, p. 164) gives three examples of holding badly in identity: (1) false narratives often manifest themselves in fraudulent contexts (Lindemann gives the example of someone falsely identified as a doctor); (2) stereotypical dismissive master narratives attributed to minorities by a dominant group undermine a person's identity established within a thriving relational context (for example, Black men being stereotyped as violent by White racists); and (3) narratives that are merely directed toward the past focus only on past relationships and ignore present modes of relating to others (e.g., associating a convicted felon solely with her crime).

Lindemann's notion of holding in identity focuses on relations and how they contribute to identity formation. In the relational account, identities are derived from, and grounded in, our relations to others. Thus, just as the function of a thing determines its essence in the essentialist approach, so one's role within the relational context in the relational

approach determines one's identity. For example, one is a parent by virtue of one's relation to one's child; there are many ways of being a parent since there are many ways of relating to one's child. As a parent, one performs parental roles and functions and has parental obligations and responsibilities; it is precisely those ways of relating to one's child and the roles one plays within those care relations that identify someone as a parent.

By analogy, one is a librarian by virtue of one's relations to library users; just as different users have different needs, so there are different ways of being a librarian. Identity, on the relational account, is inevitably context-sensitive since it is a product of unique, context-dependent relations, which, in turn, depend on the unique needs of those with whom one relates. Thus, for example, children's librarians, community librarians, and academic librarians will all have somewhat different identities because they have distinct roles by virtue of relating to differing user needs; they all, nevertheless, are *librarians*. The same, however, applies to each type of librarian. For instance, liaison librarians to different academic departments or faculties may well have different roles and thus somewhat different identities as librarians, even if both are formed within the academic context. Moreover, the same liaison librarian may relate differently to different users in response to diverse user needs (due to varying student populations, differences in the particularities of faculty members' research programs, etc.), and may also relate differently to the same users over time (as the users' needs mature, grow, change, develop, etc.).

As is becoming evident, there is more than one way of forming or holding an identity. Having proposed the concepts of searching for a professional identity and introducing two possible approaches, the ensuing discussion proposes to scrutinize these two approaches to identity, and, at least hypothetically, to choose between them.

Essentialism Is Not Beneficial to Professional Identity

How might the view of what something is give an account of what function it has? Strictly defining who or what we are could ostensibly have zero bearing on what we actually do. Adopting fixed professional identities, we are compelled to map essential traits to professional tasks, which, in turn, forces us to hang onto tasks as fixed items that make up our identity, as opposed to relations. Both professional practice and librarianship more generally, however, are much more fluid than that. For example, does something like the shift from print to digital imply a change to our fixed identity? The question assumes that there is an eternal librarian, some being that captures the Platonic Form of Librarianship, and that anything else is some other information professional, but not quite, or not necessarily, a librarian—and the question itself acts pejoratively against these people! This eternalizing of the library profession is not hidden in any way and its value is rarely analyzed. For example, Stephen Bales (2009) explains that his

> paper analyzes the available evidence to answer the question: what is the eternal librarian? Understanding the things that every academic librarian does,

regardless of time, culture, and context, allows for the identification of the archetypal academic librarian, the librarian qua librarian. (p. 2).

The fact that Bales's statements desire to answer that question is an example of the tendency to connect the professional librarian self to idealized, stable versions of that self without questioning if that desire is warranted. Fixing our identity in the past, for example, reifies the past as being good or desirable. The assumption that this past is desirable relies on a past that never was. Bales continues: "But, as this paper suggests, librarianship may potentially flower by looking backwards, by transcending the archetype, librarianship and scholarship may once again be synonymous—amazing things will result" (p. 7).

Some LIS scholars see a benefit to solidifying and reifying the eternal librarian. It certainly is tempting to do so; to know who we are and to be able easily to explain the origins of our identities would certainly be welcome, particularly since that sort of idealized historical identification has a certain romantic flavour to it. Those of us who want to reject this romanticized notion are subsequently chastised: "The unreflective librarian knows not from whence she came. This lack of historical awareness results in a dearth of professional identity and theoretical grounding" (Bales, 2009, p. 1). The use of the term unreflective here speaks to a lack of analysis mentioned above; Bales seems to suggest that to reflect on the past also entails embracing it. Unfortunately, we can only wholeheartedly embrace the past he romanticizes as long as we don't criticize it, lest we lose any of those Platonic fixed identity markers, lest we point out that they aren't universally shared.

Regrettably, we are often boxed into essentialism through no fault of our own. Essentialism is the easy and simple way to explain ourselves to others and to understand ourselves. It is certainly very tempting to point to something and say, "That's my identity." Such a ready-made, mass-produced identity is, however, also very consumeristic and far removed from the meaning of the Ancient Greeks' Delphic maxim to "know thyself." Nevertheless, it is convenient to declare a concrete and socially conforming identity, even a manufactured one, for ease of conversation when people ask, "What good is a librarian anyways?" Social convention tends toward essentialism, as it does towards embracing tradition. We argue against making a bullet list of things one does in their job and then relying on that list for job satisfaction or identity making. It is somewhat puzzling why our sense of self needs to be so wrapped up in our professional duties rather than viewing our relationships (with information, library users, etc.) as that which is constitutive of our professional identities. We experience this identity-making-through-relations all the time but possibly don't always recognize it as such. For example, when engaging with a reference question, the relation between you, the question, the person, and information seeking in that moment are what make up your librarian identity.

In professional discourse, one or two of the profession's big shifts are usually discussed, often with a substantial focus on Jesse Shera's (1972) observation of librarians moving from thinking of ourselves as bound by library documents to thinking of information as a whole as our domain. The existence of only one or two major shifts

over the course of thousands of years of librarianship speaks, arguably, to our objectivist tendencies. We haven't recognized other shifts because they haven't been captured by the objectivist account. Shera's point is a good one: our relation to information has shifted. So why are we reluctant, generally, to see ourselves as shifting and fluid? Answers and definitions that are not concrete are always scary, but we may be better served by them in the end. Not pinning ourselves down to a list of functions but rather defining ourselves through relationships allows for professional confidence and gives our identities value, whatever those identities might look like, through the strength of the relations that actually contribute to them.

There have, of course, been some attempts to avoid essentializing the librarian's professional identity, but these attempts have sidestepped the feminist/care/relational ethic (which we argue are all central components of librarian identity) by embracing contextuality versus relationality. For example, Suzanne Stauffer (2014) writes: "Implicit in this theory [of professions as a process of professional identity formation] is the realization that professional identity is a product of its social and cultural context, resulting in varied constructions relative to those contexts" (p. 256). This has helped politicize, in a positive sense, the librarian identity without completely rejecting it. Nevertheless, we have yet to fully embrace a fluid professional identity, which will fully free us from some of the contradictions of essentialism.

This is not to say we should un-specialize, homogenize, be ever-shifting, or functionalize. We are not advocating for the administrative position of functionality. Instead, the benefits derived from a relational view of librarian identity lead us to an argument in favour of decentralization and a greater focus on person-to-person interactions. For example, it is easy to recognize that a reference librarian is not defined by the existence of a reference desk, and that their relations are what make up that identity. Relational identities, in fact, allow us to specialize even further since each relation that contributes to our professional identities is unique and we adapt specifically to each one. A relational identity is marked by differences in the relations we form. Administrative functionalization or centralization, at best, treats all relations the same. In fact, we argue that relational identity would require us to decentralize. Following this argument, services ought to be based on needs, which requires a sensitivity to the specialized and unique needs of the patrons being served; professional despecialization leads to a thinning or watering down of relations, in that relations are no longer marked by differences in librarian skill or specialized attention to unique needs.

Fixed identity helps determine function, but because our functions do shift and because we have agency to determine those functions, our identities are not fixed; rather, our identities are emergent within the different and often unique networks of relations between agents. While fixing identities in objects is beneficial as it allows for universalities (e.g., a ship is a ship, a hammer is a hammer), we are arguing that that doesn't apply to human identity or function, and attempting to do so provides no tangible benefit for librarians and the profession as a whole. Essentialism, in fact, is harmful and detrimental to the librarian profession; we turn to this argument presently.

Essentialism Is Detrimental to Equity and Justice Issues

The fixed, essentialist identity sought after in much of the literature, even if it did exist, would be detrimental to our profession if we were to wholeheartedly adopt it. Moreover, our attempts at fixing librarian identity have already damaged our profession. This is because our grasping at a fixed identity leads to problems of, among others, homogeneity, exclusion, stilted progress, and exploitation.

Essentializing leads to a homogeneity problem: if all librarians can be distilled down to an essential set of properties or characteristics, that means there is only one way of being a librarian. And if essentialism entails that there is only one way of being a librarian, then essentialism contributes to *othering* those who don't fit within that idealized identity. This has political implications, specifically regarding inequality, with which we should all be familiar. Having graduate degrees, for example, as a definer excludes underserved populations from sharing in that identity. An egregious example from George Bennett's (1988) *Librarians in Search of Science and Identity* suggests librarian identity formation may even specifically be created in part because of "the desire to escape from a feminized occupation" (p. 161), specifically othering what is viewed as the feminine in order to, according to him, gain respect in academia.

Attitudes about race serve as another example. As racist structures tend to do, the elitism, White-centeredness, and racism that founded modern librarianship continues to be replicated and reified within it, much to the detriment of the profession. Librarianship is overwhelmingly White: for example, the American Library Association's [2012 Diversity Counts](#) survey reported over 100,000 White librarians and only 6,000 African American librarians, with smaller figures for other identities. It is harmful to the profession if one does not see oneself in the dominant identity while also having that identity essentialized as something to strive for and pin down.

If the practical, working essence of librarianship were universalized and essentialized today, a significant portion of the population would not be able to see or recognize themselves in that identity and thereby would be excluded from it. We are faced, also, with the logical problem concocted by homogeneity: in searching for our universal professional identity, are we merely describing what we already are, which may or may not be an accurate summation of that identity or of what we would like that identity to consist? The self-fulfilling prophecy of exacting descriptions of librarian professional identity is unfortunately not something that has been given much critique or analysis. It is often taken at face value that in our search, we are merely attempting an exact cataloguing (no pun intended) of what librarianship is, instead of turning a critical eye to our existence to suggest that our identity should not be what it merely appears to be. Those who do tend to be seen as bringing politics into libraries unnecessarily, and marginalized identities tend to take the brunt of the consequences from that supposed affront. In this vein of merely replicating an identity that has already been produced as a stereotype of librarians, Williamson and Lounsbury (2016), in their review of librarian personality traits, make several guesses as to what those traits will be, only to have and their findings match their guesses. They present their findings, but fail to consider why there are shared traits and whether or not it is truly preferable to possess those traits.

For example, they write: "we expected librarians' scores on the 16 PF Factor E—Dominance—to be lower than those of a general normative sample. Low dominance is associated with deference, tact, amenability, and willingness to be accommodating" (p. 128). The study attempts no analysis as to the social determinants of personality nor to the correlation between social pressure and the fact that the profession is populated overwhelmingly by women.

The pressure to assimilate in order to fit into the supposed librarian professional identity is strong. In his widely critiqued piece "The Librarian Stereotype: How Librarians are Damaging their Image and Profession," Eric Jennings (2016) states: "And frankly, if there are some people who fit the librarian stereotype, they are only adding to the diversity of the profession" (p. 98), asking us, whomever we may be, to lean in to the set up. He continues his request for assimilation: "But the beauty of what we have in our profession is the ability for people of various stripes to find a niche that works for them to make the larger whole work for the public" (p. 98).

The intertwining of a search for a librarian's essentials and the leveling out or homogenizing of librarians is alarming in its banality. The given-ness of these traits serves only to replicate the current status quo for professional identity. Again, if we view personality as an expression of identity, it is concerning that Williamson and Lounsbury (2016) state the following regarding the personality traits of librarians: "We believe that studying librarians' personality traits can give insight into whether librarians possess important core competencies for their jobs that should persist across work situations, specific job positions, and over the course of a career" (p. 125). The paper doesn't question whether having all librarians be in possession of similar personality traits is actually a good thing; it is merely assumed that it is, as is a deep essentialism about professional identity. This supposed objective finality is presented in the conclusion of their paper: "The present findings demonstrate a distinctive personality profile for librarians" (Williamson and Lounsbury, 2016, p.133).

While we don't deny that this could be true—that all the surveyed librarians may have such similar personalities as to be able to develop a profile of the profession—we also want to contend that this is not the right way to look at the issue. Without the sort of questioning and analysis we call for, such generalizations can be quite harmful to the profession. As for the analysis that justifies this review of personality traits, in the "Practical Implications" section the authors suggest a use for their trait catalog:

> First, individuals considering a career as a librarian can compare how their own personality traits align with those profiled here before making a decision about a college major or career in library or information sciences. Also, library administration could use this profile as a consideration in recruiting and hiring new employees. (Williamson and Lounsbury, 2016, p. 139)

Using a set of shared traits chosen *a priori* as a litmus test is another way in which seeking the essential components of a librarian's identity flattens and homogenizes the field. The local (the particular) is considered unprofessional (DeWeese, 1970) and therefore undesirable because it cannot be essentialized throughout the profession.

Essentialism and relationality tend also to map onto socially constructed perceptions of professionalism and unprofessionalism respectively. Library service has historically been seen as feminine and thereby unprofessional, as have other care-based occupations like nursing or parenting. Relational roles have historically been deprofessionalized and devalued. This socially constructed sentiment has pushed those seeking the acknowledgment of the work of librarians as professional labour to essentialist modes of identifying the work force. Unfortunately, as we have been arguing, essentialism is actually quite harmful to the profession, which is why we propose to reclaim relationality within the context of professional identity.

As an example, one practical dimension of the homogeneity problem, which the adoption of essentialist identity underpins, is code-switching, a linguistic and social practice that sees alterations in speech and behavior patterns to, among other things, fit in with the dominant in-group. For many underserved populations, the static or eternal librarian identity doesn't fit with their personal or at home identity, forcing code switching. Librarian La Loria Konata (2017) describes an example from her own background and experience:

> Some of this can be traced back to the slave era, when slaves found it beneficial to act in a way that was appealing to their slave owners. They could not be themselves or express themselves freely without suffering severe repercussions. This still lingers today. (p.116)

Universalizing librarianship implies that people can't truly be themselves. The double edges here are the problems of homogeneity and exclusion; when there's only one way of being, to put it simply, people tend to ignore ways of being outside of that static model in favour of the essentialized mold they are so desperately trying to fit into. On the other hand, those who find it too difficult to code switch are excluded as being unfit for the profession. If diversity and inclusion are desirable in librarianship, which we contend they are, then essentialism only helps to retain the homogenous status quo, which the profession has been trying to resist. A relational model of identity building embraces individual differences as the unique and complex building blocks necessary for relationship formation.

As is becoming evident, an essentialist identity poses a progress problem, namely that we may not be able to make progress in certain areas, such as the promotion of diversity and inclusion, if our professional identity is bound by fixed attributes. This is, in fact, an enormous obstacle to current efforts of institutional decentralization of dominant ideologies. An identity that relies on fixed attributes prevents us from even broaching subjects such as the decolonization of our profession. Colonialism's effects are necessarily relational and deconstructing, and it is obviously vital to understand those relations and their part in our profession's history and identity. We cannot both cling to a fixed identity and critique that identity effectively: "If the stability of identity depends on an artificial coherence that creates fixed reference points in thought (and action), how do we know, do or write anything at odds with the received view?" (Brennan, 1996, p. 95).

Essentialism takes on different forms, but is just as dangerous in different instantiations. For example, the equivocation between institutional identity and individual professional identities reinforces this progress problem. Hicks (2016) argues that the actual physical space of a library plays a role in our professional identity formation. Hicks claims that librarians, through identity construction, tend to act as though the library itself is essential. The argument is that people trust the institution of the library but not the local or specific personage of the library. Essentializing professional identity in terms of the institution is one of the ways systemic problems are perpetuated. "As a symbol, the library represents who librarians are—that is, they are dedicated and flexible service professionals, while the skill and expertise they use to run the library is a demonstration of how, as professionals, librarians act" (p. 327). Without serious unpacking, it is unclear how useful this concept is to the notion of identify formation. Attaching oneself to a place or space as though to a plank of identity is easy but, at bare minimum, ignores political relations in those places and adds to the problem of essentialism stagnating progress.

We also believe a fixed identity suffers from an exploitation problem: when faced with possible destruction of the profession (e.g., via budget cuts, etc.) we are often asked to prove our worth via a set of attributes or functions that are supposed to identify us as professionals. These circumstances exploit an institutional panic over potential resource loss. Forward directional pressure of organizations often tends towards essentialism under the guise of calls to remain relevant. This can lead to situations that force librarians to settle on essentially (as opposed to relationally) defined identities as a defence against being disrespected or not taken seriously. Because fixed identity allows for simplistic answers to who is a librarian and what it is that they do, the expected answers are the usual bullet point lists that outline job responsibilities and services provided. These kinds of answers can feel like a safety net; listing the attributes library users couldn't possibly live without means library services and librarians will ostensibly continue to be supported. Ironically, this is often a moment when relying on that fixed identity can backfire: if you point to the planks of your proverbial ship to outline who you are, it is easier to identify those elements that are deemed (and not always accurately so) no longer necessary, further degrading librarian identity as a whole. The problem is often framed thusly:

> In the modern environment of budget challenges, it is important to be able to articulate the value of both libraries and particularly librarians… If we are unable to effectively communicate who we are and what we do, the public will not know either and then it is difficult to justify our existence and our positions within the library. (Seminelli, 2016, p. 63)

Unfortunately, as we have argued, resorting to essentialism not only degrades the depth of the profession by reducing our services or attributes to a shallow and watered-down list of fundable, and thus employable, traits, but it also endangers the progress and diversification toward which our profession strives.

Objections and Replies

One possible worry with the relational approach to librarian identity may be that, while different librarians may perform varying functions, there certainly still are many similarities between what different librarians do within their differing roles. Moreover, there are also similarities in how they relate to library users even if the target audiences are quite different. These similarities, it might be argued, can be generalized in an effort to derive a more universal librarian identity.

Although such generalizations can indeed be translated into a more universalized conception of librarian identity, the worry about engaging in this particular mode of identification is that it leads right back to essentialism, which we have argued against in part because essentializing the profession merely serves to stereotype it in ways librarians have continually resisted. We argue that essentializing librarianship will only serve to thwart the effort to both professionalize and reconceptualize librarian identity.

Another objection could be raised against the use of the theoretical grounding of personal identity as an appropriate analogy for a discussion of professional identity. While this analogy, like all analogies, has its limits, professional identity is nevertheless much more analogous to personal identity than it is to objective identity. The similarity between the two—a similarity that is not merely grounded in analogy—is that both types of identity are inseparably immersed and grounded in complex networks and webs of human relations. We are arguing that the concept of professional identity is better understood through the prism of the relational approach than it is through the lens of the essentialist approach, which arguably only really works well for objects like ships, but fails to capture the complex nuances of personal and professional identities.

A final worry may be that the relational approach cannot be readily utilized in the formulation of an elevator pitch about what librarians do or who, professionally speaking, librarians are. In other words, the relational account does not lend itself to overarching generalizations that might help non-librarians understand librarian roles and functions or understand the place of libraries within institutional or social contexts.

This worry is not wholly founded since the relational account lends itself quite well to the formulation of an elevator pitch, but only with regard to one's particular and unique roles, functions, and duties. Thus, the pitch will be different for different librarians, and the listing of roles, functions, and duties will likely be incomplete since professional librarian roles are inevitably responsive to the needs of library users. Single, uniform answers to questions like "What do you do?" or "What does a librarian do?" are, therefore, impossible. Librarians must learn to be comfortable with the dynamic reality of their profession, while keeping in mind that a lack of clarity about what librarians do generally speaking does not translate to a lack of precision about what individual librarians do in the unique contexts in which they practice their professions.

Conclusion

In this paper we have suggested that embracing a more relational identity would be beneficial to the profession, both as individual librarians and as a whole. An essentialized approach, while at first glance appealing, does not benefit librarians and, in fact, actively does harm to the profession via its modes of, among other things, homogenization and challenges to progress. We are not merely suggesting that librarian identities have come undone and have become fluid in response to changing informational demands. Rather, we are suggesting that there is not, never was, and never ought to be a fixed (essentialist) librarian identity because librarian identity has always been fluent, dynamic, and responsive to user needs. Although our approach is a philosophical one, we seek to champion all relational approaches, especially emergent antiracist and other social justice oriented proposals.

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