

The Missing Women Library Directors: Deprivation versus Mentoring

Janice J. Kirkland

Why is the percentage of women academic library directors much lower than the percentage of women in the profession as a whole? This article examines survey responses to conclude that factors blocking the advancement of women library directors include deprivation behavior or antimentoring, which supports a glass ceiling. A second survey finds that mentoring is a central factor in career advancement of many women library directors.



Why are there not more women library directors? Although 75 to 80 percent of American librarians are women, they hold far fewer than 75 percent of directorships, especially of large or prestigious libraries. “While the data certainly show some advances for women in librarianship, there remains a puzzling persistence of inequity . . . including an underrepresentation at the top.”¹ Although the number of women directors in the 4,700 U.S. academic libraries is not known, the improbability that there are 3,760 of them—which would be 80 percent of 4,700—suggests hundreds of missing women library directors.²

Much research has been devoted to the reasons that few women become directors, and many possible causes have been presented; some of them certainly have a core of truth, but none of them explains enough. This article suggests a dual cause: a library version of the notorious glass ceiling for women, kept in place by

use of deprivation behavior; and the reverse phenomenon of a glass escalator supported by acceptance behavior for men. As support for the deprivation theory, a survey found a strong presence of mentoring, the opposite of deprivation, in many careers of women who had succeeded in becoming library directors.

This research grew very gradually over several years. The original plan was to find reasons for the missing library directors by seeking input from women librarians themselves, asking not only for their opinions on why there are not more women in high library positions, but also whether they had had, or knew of, experiences that discourage women from trying to rise in administration. The name given to such experiences of discouragement was deprivation behavior.

The Preliminary Inquiry

The first stage was to find out whether some of the author’s colleagues endorsed

Janice J. Kirkland is Women’s Studies Coordinator in the Stiern Library at California State University, Bakersfield; e-mail: jkirkland@csubak.edu.

FIGURE 1
Types of Deprivation Behavior

1. *Responsibility deprivation: Preliminaries but not the real work.* Chairing only secondary committees. Advisory, but not supervisory role; preparation, but not implementation; uncovering the foregone conclusion; responsibility without authority.

2. *Information deprivation: Cutting off the pipeline.* Ignoring the sacred tenet of access to information by selective communication; delayed communication; assignment of information sources away from women; not recording the work of women (evidence tends to vanish).

3. *Recognition and approval deprivation: Praising his article, ignoring her book.* The double standard in viewing accomplishment; men make slipups, women make ERRORS; recycling male librarians, replacing female librarians.

4. *Solidarity deprivation: Using women against each other.* The irresistible appeal to self-worth in junior women leads them to depreciate female colleagues. The invisible ceiling above senior women; using paraprofessional women staff against librarians.

the idea of deprivation behavior, represented by a list of sample behaviors or techniques used to discourage female ambition (see figure 1). If there was no support for the idea, the author would not proceed further in investigating it.

The list was sent to a test group of twenty women librarians, including eleven from libraries of other campuses in the California State University (CSU) system, seven from other states, one editor of a professional journal, and an ALA staff member. All but three of the librarians were academic. This was a very informal poll with no attempt to choose a representative range of recipients.

There was a high rate of return. Sixteen of the twenty replied, and fifteen of them considered the deprivation concept to be worth pursuing. One thought it

“very provocative” whereas another described it as a “novel and fresh approach to the subject” of the missing directors. One respondent stated, “I have lived through most of the deprivations you cite.” Another commented, “I think documentation of this type is badly needed in our field.” Recognizing the same need, another respondent wrote, “Most men and women may not realize that what is happening is discriminatory and will continue to allow these types of things to happen” unless they are made aware.

It also was clear from several replies that responsibility for deprivation behavior must be attributed to administrators of both sexes and to nonlibrarians in positions of power above library hierarchies. Most important, many respondents suggested that the basic point of deprivation research should be to provide information on how to deal with it positively and productively.

Following the preliminary inquiry, the seemingly unrelated subject of pay equity shed some additional light on the question of missing women directors. A number of studies indicated that one reason for the lack of widespread agitation for higher librarian salaries could be a lack of a sense of entitlement, which is true of many women in general and must therefore also be true of a profession in which women predominate numerically.³ If it is true that women have a lower sense than men of the opportunities which

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their abilities, education, and experience entitle them to, it also would be true that fewer women than men feel entitled to seek high administrative positions. There is therefore likely to be an added dimension to deprivation that must be taken

into account. To external deprivation imposed upon ambitious women to prevent them from rising in rank, add internal, yet societally imposed, psychological deprivation preventing some capable women librarians from feeling themselves entitled to seek directorships.

A former head of the ALA Office for Library Personnel Resources, one of the preliminary deprivation inquiry recipients, commented: "Are you addressing the issue of women getting to middle management but then not to the top? Our statistics show that they do fairly well up to department head/branch head positions in terms of women in the profession, but then drop off at top management jobs." It is reasonable to hypothesize that both internal and external types of deprivation are involved in this dropping off, and that externally imposed deprivation probably is not applied most intensively until women librarians reach department head or branch head level and begin to be seen as potential competition with men for higher positions.

Survey 1: Fifty Librarians

The next step in deprivation research was to compile a short four-question survey and select a sample of fifty women librarians to receive it. The list included librarians in twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia, none of whom had received the preliminary inquiry. The survey explained deprivation behavior and asked for experience with or observation of it. Perhaps because it asked for deprivation incidents from respondents' own careers, and some did not want to share painful experiences despite assurances of confidentiality, the rate of return was a low 24 percent. However, those questionnaires that were returned were a trove of useful comments supporting the idea that some women librarians' professional advancement suffers from deprivation.

The first question asked if their positions permitted respondents to work up

to their full potential (responsibility deprivation). Some respondents said they were able to do so at this point in their careers, indicating the possibility that the situation could change. One respondent qualified her reply by saying that she was working up to her potential in some areas, but not in others. Of those who said they were unable to work up to their full potential, one commented that she had never had a supervisor capable of fostering staff development. Another said that she had been forced to drop back, not reaching her full potential, and "compensate in other parts of my life."

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The second question asked if they had experienced or observed deprivation behavior like that previously described. Most of the respondents had either experienced or observed deprivation that inhibited the professional development of women librarians. They provided examples derived from every deprivation category; a single type of behavior sometimes simultaneously affected more than one woman librarian by diminishing their responsibilities and information and by removing or blocking recognition and support.

Several responses noted a preference by directors for male subordinates, particularly in supervising positions related to technology, which effectually deprived females of opportunities to take on new and challenging responsibilities. "The director favors the new people she hires, all males. They receive higher pay than female employees already on staff, are given the more visible assignments and responsibilities, and spend more time just 'chatting' with her."

Deprivation is obviously not a simple matter of persons of one sex opposing persons of the other but, rather, of some

administrators of both sexes being prejudiced against women. Such prejudices can be active despite the immediate availability of evidence to the contrary, as in the example one respondent reported of bias in favor of males in technology: "For a media position, I was advised to seek a 'young man' even though the staff members then doing the job successfully were women." In another technology-related example, the least experienced librarian on staff—and the only male—was given responsibility for an automation project.

The respondents were keenly aware of a lack of needed support from their administrators. One respondent reported having a male director who "could be a great mentor but doesn't want to" and another had a director who saw nothing wrong in belonging to a local all-male club where high-level campus administrators met.

The third question asked for the effects on self-image and performance of women who suffered deprivation. Respondents reported varied reactions to experiences of deprivation, but anger, the natural human reaction to mistreatment, was rarely mentioned, probably because most women rarely express their anger.

Although we seldom admit it, women firmly believe that our rage is fully as dangerous as an atomic bomb. . . . After all, what happens when a woman gets angry? Men avoid or abandon her. Other women pull away because their own unresolved rage is suddenly alerted. She is left alone.⁴

Instead of anger, more acceptable reactions were mentioned. One woman recommended that women leave situations of deprivation and mentioned a colleague whose ideas were stolen and who moved elsewhere to a directorship. In this case, deprivation was a spur to career advancement. However, not everyone was so fortunate. "My self-image is tak-

ing a beating," said one librarian who was about to resign her position without having found a new job. Another respondent had the same concern: "We could all use a course on preserving and protecting our self-image."

When there was no corrective action possible, the responses described a range of coping mechanisms, one of which was simply to keep quiet—silence in meetings, silence when the administration asked for input or opinions. Some buried themselves in their work ("deep task involvement") or became punctilious about performance ("many memos on minutiae"). Some saw colleagues absent themselves from the job by frequent sick leave, probably caused by deprivation stress, which is an important area needing more investigation.

The replies made it clear that deprivation seriously affects morale and job performance, which in turn negatively affect the overall library operation. Unconscious gender prejudices not only affect evaluation of female performance, they also affect the performance itself. "Low expectations of achievement frequently become self-fulfilling prophecies. Those who predict inadequate performance tend to signal their assumptions in subtle ways, and this negative feedback leads to anxiety, mistakes and *diminished aspirations*."⁵ The central problem, however, is not the current work situation but, rather, the future effects. The women's belief in themselves is harmed, and they will be less likely or unlikely to apply for higher positions.

The fourth and most important question asked for methods to improve women's advancement in librarianship, and the responses showed that the subject had been given much thought. Replies dealt with mobility, self-confidence, mentoring, and other ideas. Here are some of the comments:

"Librarians/women to advance in their careers have to believe in themselves—and we're taught not to."

"If women wish to advance in the field, they must be willing and able to travel to new areas."

"We need mentors—no one up there will help anyone below!" Several respondents called for new evaluations of attitudes toward, and treatment of, women librarians. One saw a need to "raise consciousness—help people identify deprivation situations which they don't even recognize as such . . . and then provide realistic methods of dealing with them." Another gave specific advice on what a woman librarian needs to learn and unlearn:

"Learn image and 'power' communications skills so that our arguments and positions can be persuasively presented. Learn how to handle conflict. Develop networks of women administrators and look for one or two female mentors to learn from. 'Unlearn' how to be supportive and cooperative sometimes; that is, learn how to hold your own if the issue is worth fighting for."

One writer, speculating that her director felt threatened by her activity in state and national organizations, called for time to be donated by the library for professional development: "How am I supposed to get involved, meet people, advance my career when I have to fight with my director for time off to attend meetings? That's what bothers me most." Others made similar comments: "Women should be appointed to as many committees as possible, should study and write whenever possible, and be encouraged to do so by time relief and appropriate funds."

The big picture of the profession as a whole was considered by one respondent, who, after recommending that women librarians work on their assertiveness and communication skills, went on to say that:

Gaining the support of fellow professionals, mobilizing other women, getting the attention of legislators—

all require good speaking and writing. Actively spotlight women who have progressed in responsibility and authority. Seek them out as advisors or mentors. When planning programs, engage as many women speakers as possible. When a woman performs poorly, try to help her *improve*. Especially, praise people when they do well.

The results of the first survey show that some women librarians are being deprived—and know they are being deprived—of time, attention, encouragement, support, praise, advice, and other necessities for professional success. In the employment world at large, the collective descriptor for this situation is the term *glass ceiling*. The ceiling impedes the rise of women to positions of power. Deprivation may be seen as a collection of techniques to establish and maintain the ceiling.

Many women have paid their dues, even a premium, for a chance at a top position, only to find a glass ceiling between them and their goal. The glass ceiling is not simply a barrier for an individual, based on the person's inability to handle a higher-level job. Rather, the glass ceiling applies to women as a group who are kept from advancing higher *because they are women*.⁶

However, the career damage of the glass ceiling is not all that women librarians have to contend with. In librarianship, there is a reverse phenomenon affecting male librarians called the *glass escalator* which takes them to the top. An alternative method of describing the same problem is a joke the author first heard in library school. The joke wryly asks why male librarians are like dead fish. The answer is, "because they both rise to the top." Of course, the dead fish syndrome

FIGURE 2
Women Director Career Factors:
One-Minute Survey

This one-question survey is going only to women academic library directors in the hope that your responses will provide an encouraging ending to an article in process, "The Missing Women Library Directors." Thank you for participating! Please mark the three (3) most important factors in your career advancement in priority order 1 (top), 2, and 3. Hard work is assumed and is not listed.

- ___ Academic majors/degrees
- ___ Family support
- ___ Mentor(s):
 women__ men__ both___
- ___ Mobility/job change
- ___ Networking, informal
- ___ Publication
- ___ Professional organization service
- ___ Role model(s)
- ___ Tenacity/perseverance
- ___ Technology
- ___ Other factors or general
 comments

or glass escalator is present in other fields too, where men are in the minority, including nursing, social work, and elementary school teaching.

The recent work of sociologist Christine Williams is helpful in understanding male advancement in these areas. For her book *Still a Man's World*, she interviewed ninety-nine persons in librarianship and the other three fields mentioned above. Her comment on one interview shows that even a disinterested male may be pushed toward the glass escalator because of gender:

A public librarian specializing in children's collections (a heavily female concentration) described an encounter with this "escalator" in his first job out of library school. . . . His supervisors criticized him for not aiming high enough. "They assumed that because

I was a male . . . I wasn't doing the kind of management-oriented work that they thought I should be doing."

Williams explains: "I do not mean to suggest that the men I interviewed all resented or resisted the informal tracking they experienced. . . . Some men entered these occupations anticipating that they would ride the 'glass escalator.' They planned to move into administration or management as quickly as possible."⁷

It is important to identify and understand behavior leading to the glass ceiling which stops women librarians and to the glass escalator which raises men librarians. Such understanding, if it leads to behavior change, can be the first step in changing the gender ratio of directorships and bringing it closer to the gender ratio among librarians at large. Once all librarians feel that they have a fair and equal chance to advance based upon their abilities and potential, notwithstanding their gender, more women will work toward, and apply for, top administrative vacancies.⁸

Survey 2: 135 Women Directors

The second survey was intended to seek career factors that women directors had found most valuable in their advancement—factors that would be the reverse of deprivation and the glass ceiling. For this purpose, the author conducted an e-mail inquiry of women directors belonging to WALDEN (Women Academic Library Directors Engaged in Networking).⁹ Because directors are busy people, the "one-minute survey" asked only one question with eleven possible answers from which to mark the top three (see figure 2). The question was, What are the three career factors most important in your rise to a directorship?

Of the 135 members, 61 (45%) responded. As table 1 shows, the five factors most frequently chosen, along with the number of women who chose them, were mobility (34), mentors (25), aca-

TABLE 1
Responses to the Survey of Women Directors

	Ranked	1st	2d	3d	Unranked	Total
Academic majors/degrees		3	4	9	5	21
Family support		6	1	5	1	13
Mentor(s)		13	7	0	5	25
Mobility/job change		7	16	5	6	34
Networking, informal		2	5	6	2	15
Publication		0	1	1	2	4
Professional organization service		2	5	8	5	20
Role model(s)		3	1	1	2	7
Tenacity/perseverance		6	5	5	3	19
Technology		2	3	4	1	10
Other factors		4	1	1	1	7

ademic majors/degrees (21), professional organizations (20), and tenacity/perseverance (19). The three least-often selected factors were technology (10), role models (7), and publication (4), which seems surprising in view of the widespread pursuit of technology and the continuing stress on publishing in academe. Eleven of the sixty-one directors suggested career factors not on the survey, such as leadership and management skills, internships, political astuteness (savvy), communication, integrity, and "having the right skills at the right time in the right place." Many added useful comments, some of which are quoted below. Several directors noted that all or most of the factors were important, and it was difficult to choose only three. Therefore, some survey responses should be regarded as approximate, but the gap between those most chosen and those least chosen was wide and clear.

Because the respondents were asked to rank their answers, the next step was to analyze how many of them gave first place to each of the most-chosen factors. This resulted in a change in interpreting which was the single most important factor. The top five factors, along with the number of those respondents giving them first place, were: professional or-

ganizations (2), academic majors/degrees (3), tenacity/perseverance (6), mobility (7), and mentors (13).

Twenty-five directors gave credit to mentors, with thirteen putting mentors in first place and seven putting them in second place. Therefore, for twenty of the sixty-one directors, or almost one-third, mentors were of prime importance to their suc-

cess. No other single factor came close to mentors in significance. This result plainly shows the reverse side of the coin from deprivation behavior, which might be described as "antimentoring." On the one hand are capable women librarians who are discouraged from seeking administrative positions (deprivation); on the other hand are capable women librarians who are actively encouraged (mentoring) to seek administrative positions and who succeed in attaining them.

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The mentor choice asked those who selected it to specify whether their mentors were men, women, or both. Table 2 shows the results. Because of the disproportionate number of male directors who were available to mentor these women as they rose through the ranks, it is not surprising to find that individual male mentors outnumber female mentors seven to three. What is striking about the results, however, is the number of current directors who had mentors of *both* sexes. This may imply that librarians who have men and women mentors have an advantage in advancement, possibly deriving

TABLE 2
Gender of Mentors

Female mentors	3
Male mentors	7
Both	13
Gender not given	2
Total	25

different strengths from each, or that the more mentors she has, the better training and more confidence a woman aiming at library administration may gain.

One respondent said she had "always worked for men, some wonderful ones who saw human beings as opposed to men or women and generously served as mentors." Another offered testimony to the power of just a few words: "I had one mentor I spoke with only once but he said to me, 'Have you ever considered becoming a library administrator? I think you would be a good one.' The truth was, I had *never* considered it before that moment. Didn't he do me a good turn?"

A respondent with two mentors said they were "an assistant director who challenged me enormously but who always conveyed confidence that I could do what he asked; later, one of the first female ARL directors, who expected a lot from us and made us do our homework."

One director wrote wistfully: "Would have loved a mentor but never had one." Instead, she had two role models, one of whom was her mother, a working woman who raised her "with the expectation that I would not only work but be successful." This comment helps to explain the success of some of the women directors who did not have mentors. Hopefully, they had someone important

to them who expected that they "would not only work but be successful," and human beings tend to live up to what is expected of them.

On the question of mentors, the increasing number of women library directors should, in the future, provide an increased number of mentors who will in turn increase the number of women library directors. Such increases are already being seen. For example, in 1970, the largest U.S. public university system, the California State University system, had nineteen campuses each with a male library director. Today, the twenty-two CSU campuses have ten women directors (45%). WALDEN, the organization that sent out the survey, has grown from a dozen women directors at its start to a present estimated size of 135. It is easy to see why one respondent wrote that she was unaware that there were any missing women library directors. In reply, it should be asked if any 80 percent male field accepts men in less than 80 percent of its leadership roles.

Conclusion

Increased awareness of gender bias is needed by all persons concerned in the selection of directors, including not only librarians but also academic administrators, teaching faculty, trustees, and others. Bias has become subtle rather than blatant, but it still exists in academe. Indeed, in some places it thrives. That form of gender bias which in this article is called deprivation behavior must be dug out and destroyed wherever it is found in libraries. Every librarian, regardless of gender, must be mentored and actively encouraged to work up to her or his full potential. Only then will the profession be able to find its missing women library directors.

Notes

1. Suzanne Hildenbrand, "Still Not Equal: Closing the Library Gender Gap," *Library Journal* 122 (Mar. 1, 1997): 44-46.

2. *American Library Directory, 1996-97*, vol. 1 (New Providence, N.J.: Bowker, 1996), x.

3. Janice J. Kirkland, "Equity and Entitlement: Internal Barriers to Improving the Pay of Academic Librarians," *College & Research Libraries* 52 (July 1991): 375–80.

4. Anne Wilson Schaef, *Women's Reality: An Emerging Female System in a White Male Society* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 85–86.

5. Deborah L. Rhode, *Justice and Gender: Sex Discrimination and the Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Pr., 1989), 171.

6. Ann M. Morrison, R. P. White, E. Van Velsor, and Center for Creative Leadership, *Breaking the Glass Ceiling* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1992): 13.

7. Christine Williams, *Still a Man's World: Men Who Do Women's Work* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Pr., 1995), 87–89.

8. Particular thanks to the women librarians who responded to the painful and difficult topic of deprivation behavior in the hope that the survey would help other women who are undergoing deprivation. The author has protected their anonymity by removing identifiable details from responses.

9. Appreciation to all sixty-one participants, including Linda Dobb, Dean of Libraries and Learning Resources at Bowling Green State University, who suggested using WALDEN; and Karin Borei, Director of Library and Information Resources at Trinity College of Vermont, who sent out the survey to WALDEN members and forwarded responses.