

To see ourselves as others see us*

Peter Judge has been reading the NBLC report on *Status and Image of the Librarian*

* This oft-quoted phrase from Robert Burns's poem *To a louse* is highly relevant here—the moral lies in the last two (seldom-quoted) lines of the stanza:

*O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursel as ithers see us!
It wad frae mory a blunder free us,
And foolish notion.*

Dr R A C Bruijns, of the Dutch Center for Public Libraries and Literature (NBLC) has set out to see librarians as others see them, but has not listed their blunders and foolish notions. He has conducted a survey on the status and image of librarians in society in twelve countries, by means of a questionnaire comparing librarians with 27 other occupations from chambermaid to judge. He asked how the respondents' perception of three kinds of librarian—in public and university libraries, and 'documentalists' (European usage of this term can cover special librarians or information officers)—would rank them against these other occupations in respect of prestige, attractiveness, level of education required, potential earning power, and characteristics of the librarians as people.

The survey was conducted by students from the Library School in Amsterdam and from similar schools in Belgium, France, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Finland, England, Scotland, Hungary, the Philippines and South Africa. The students were asked to question 'the public' (not family and friends, to avoid bias), and to try to complete at least 150 questionnaires in each country. A grand total of 2742 forms came back.

The results were coded and analysed using the SPSS statistical package, inevitably filling the report with numbers, most of them tiny. But certain themes or trends recurred, and a much abridged summary of what Bruijns found is given below. The word 'perceptions' keeps recurring, and you must remember that what we are dealing with in such a survey is what the public in those twelve countries *thinks* or *perceives* about librarians—these are *images*, not facts, and Bruijns's findings cannot safely be extrapolated from the countries surveyed to any others.

Factors determining status

The survey showed that the key factors (of the factors included in the questionnaire) determining the status of an occupation are perceptions of 'education' and 'amount of responsibility'. A third, less important factor, appearing to influence status is 'social importance'. Bruijns found that women attach more importance to the factor 'level of education' than men, and the higher-educated respondents emphasise 'amount of responsibility'.

Status

The highest status in all countries belongs to the occupations that are 'known' (*editor's quotes*) to require an education at a high academic level, but library occupations are generally not seen in this category. If we rank all occupations according to their social status, then the librarian in a university (a 'university librarian', not *the* 'University Librarian') comes behind 20–25% of all occupations, at about the same level as the teacher at a grammar school, the journalist and the teacher at a primary school. The public librarian is somewhere in the middle, with the nurse, the social worker and the army officer.

The poor documentalists are least understood and is put some-

where near the bottom, with the policeman and the bookkeeper. Things are seen differently in different countries: for example, the university librarian has a relatively higher status in Belgium, but a lower status in the Philippines, France and Great Britain. Bruijns comments that this is food for thought for Great Britain, 'the cradle of professional librarianship'.

Attractiveness

There is less difference between the highest and lowest score on the 'attractiveness ladder' than on the social status ladder. Being a university librarian in the 12 participating countries is seen as less attractive than 16% of the other occupations, about equal to a teacher at a grammar school or a business economist. Being a public librarian is less attractive than about 40% of the other occupations. There are differences between countries: being a librarian seems relatively more attractive in Germany and Belgium than elsewhere.

The older or higher-educated the respondent, the more attractive the library occupations are perceived. Women and library-users (compared with men and non-users) also find the library occupations more attractive.

Perceived level of education required

Across the 12 countries, the judge and the family doctor are head and shoulders above the others in terms of perceived level of education required. The library occupations have virtually the same positions as they have on the social status ladder: the public thinks that 20% of the occupations have a higher level of education than a university librarian. In fact, *all* occupations that are generally 'known' to require an academic degree precede the university librarian. The public librarian is about one third down the scale.

Justified level of income

How much should librarians earn? Public perception puts 25% of the occupations ahead of the university librarian in earning power, and 45% ahead of the public librarian. This puts the university librarian level with a high school teacher or a journalist and the public librarian level with a nurse, a computer operator, an army officer, a policeman or a social worker. In effect, the public thinks their appropriate incomes are relatively the same as their positions on the social status scale. Bruijns deduces that it is not so much the income that determines status, it is rather the opposite—the perceived social status determines what one should earn.

Image of the librarian

The public generally sees the librarian as an orderly person, who 'likes to help other people'. So, about 70% of respondents answered 'helpful' and 'orderly'. About 50% considered the librarian to be friendly and calm. About 40% consider the librarian also to be 'intelligent'. Hardly anybody thought librarians are 'slow', 'shy', 'unworldly' and 'meddlesome'. On the other hand, the librarian is also not perceived as humorous or sports-loving. The description 'fussy' got low scores, except in France, Scotland and England.

The age of the respondents made a difference here: the over-55s were more likely than the younger sample to see the librarian as orderly, helpful, friendly and intelligent. Respondents

under 35 were twice as likely to find a librarian 'boring'. Library-users were more likely than non-users to say that the librarian is friendly and intelligent. Good service clearly scores good marks!

Bruijns asked whether the respondents thought the work was particularly appropriate for men or for women. Most respondents saw the occupation as gender neutral—only 15% on average considered librarianship to be especially suited to women. Those 15% tended to be, says Bruijns, 'those older than 55 years, men and lowly educated people'. *No comment on the grouping!*

Conclusions

Bruijns has compared his results with those from earlier studies, and decides that they have not differed greatly across the years. In other words, he says, the status of the occupation nowadays is still much the same as it was in those countries 20–25 years ago. If we do not distinguish between the different kinds of librarians, then the librarian gets a position on the social status ladder behind approximately 40% of all occupations. If we do make a distinction between the different kinds of librarians, then we see that the public's perception puts the university librarian behind about 25% of the other occupations, the public librarian behind about 50%, and the documentalist behind about 60%. In general the status of the librarian is seen as on a par with occupations requiring vocational training, presumably because in the countries surveyed the public did not understand what education for librarianship entails.

Bruijns takes a pessimistic view of the prospects for the status of the librarian improving in the near future, for three reasons. In the first place it appears that occupations in the technological sector—among which the occupation of librarian does *not* belong—get a higher status. In the second place the status of the librarian is especially low in countries like Great

Britain where librarians have been striving to improve their professional recognition for years. In the third place, the status of the occupation is seen as lower by younger than by older people—the situation may be getting worse.

As for status, so for image. Studies over the past 20–25 years indicate that the image of the librarian has changed just as little as their status. Library work is *not* perceived as dynamic, lively, innovative, etc. It is therefore not surprising that young people (under 35) find working in a library less attractive, as this group especially perceives the work to be based on routine, less interesting and less varied. Bruijns asks who, then, is attracted to the occupation of the librarian and answers that they seem to be the younger people who identify themselves with society's image (stereotype) of the librarian. If this is true, then they are unlikely to change themselves or the profession.

And while librarianship seems no longer to be viewed as primarily a women's preserve, more women continue to be more attracted to the occupation than men. It is still the case, says Bruijns, that women show more affinity to those sectors in the labour market that are seen as cultural, or educational, or caring.

Your editor has done his best to give a fair summary of Bruijns's findings, while being amazed and dismayed by some of them. It is evident that a huge public education effort is needed in the countries surveyed to change some of these perceptions. Public perceptions would be quite different in Australia. *Wouldn't they?*

The report *Status and Image of the Librarian* by Dr R A C Bruijns is published in English by the NBLC (the Dutch Center for Public Libraries and Literature) and is obtainable from the Center at P O Box 93054, 2509 AB The Hague, Netherlands. 54 pp incl 25 statistical tables. Price Dfl 32.50 excl VAT and postage. NBLC's order number 12237, ISBN 90 6252 833 3. Fax (070) 141600. ■

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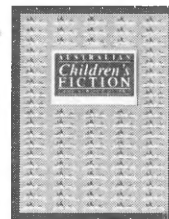
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