

Are you sure you're a librarian?
by Sarah Houghton

A kind-looking 60-something woman in an alabaster linen suit with matching gloves sits across from me, further furrowing her already furrowed brow. She cocks her head to one side, leans toward me slightly, and asks “Are you sure you're a librarian?” This question is asked in earnest, and even after I reply with a smile that yes, I am sure, and the conversation has moved on to other things, she has not. She asks again, “Are you absolutely positive? You have to be a librarian to be here. You aren't old enough to be a librarian.”

I was 26 at the time, and in fact had two Masters degrees under my belt. And she was not, as you might imagine, some kindly aunt or good-natured patron. She was the head of the local chapter of an honorary society for librarians, and this occurred at their annual get-together at CLA.

So, why was this fellow-librarian so incredulous that I could share in her degree-status? Was it my manner of dress? I don't think so—I was dressed in a black suit and had my CLA conference badge & pendant for the aforementioned honorary society about my neck. Was it the way I spoke? Hopefully not—aside from a gradually diminishing Midwestern accent, I am a well-spoken and well-mannered Californian. So, what was it? It was the lack of wrinkles—simple as that.

There have been many stories and complaints of age-discrimination in the workplace bandied about on library listservs, blogs, and websites geared toward young librarians. The phrases “baby librarian” and “you're too young to appreciate that. . .” have become totems of ageism for those of us in the younger half of the workforce¹. Our hackles go up, our jaws clench, and we prepare to justify our knowledge, our professionalism, and even our presence to those who dare utter those phrases.

The problem is not that we are simply being asked our age. In all honesty, though, if I asked an older colleague, “Are you sure you're a librarian? You look old enough to be retired,” it would be deemed utterly unacceptable. Instead, the problem lies in the fact that the questioning of our age is often tied to questioning our competence.

- “Back when I got *my* degree, we all had to memorize Dewey and LC. Now the degree just doesn't mean as much.”
- “I know this book was published before you were born, so I don't expect you to know about it.”
- “I don't know if you should be doing outreach to local businesses—you look so young that they won't take the library seriously.”
- “You're far too young to appreciate the complexities of the reference desk.”

In my two years as e-Services Librarian for the Marin County Free Library, only one co-worker has ever questioned my competence based on my age. On the contrary, a number of librarians and paraprofessionals with whom I work have told me how wonderful they think it is that 1) a young librarian is in their midst and 2) I “am where I am” professionally at such a young age. I think that is because my qualifications, proficiency, and attitude speak for themselves. In short, people

¹ Amanda Roberts. “Combating Ageism: Lessons Learned by ‘Baby’ Librarians.” *NMRT Footnotes*. Vol. 33, No. 2, November 2003.

who know me and know my work don't concern themselves with how many candles there are on my birthday cake.

I have, however, experienced ageism with people who don't know me or my work—at professional conferences, consortium meetings, and incidents like the one described above. And every time it happens I am surprised that a profession thought of as being so open-minded and free-thinking has members who still hold onto the idea that age = ability. Youth does naturally equate to a lack of experiences. There's no arguing with temporal physics. Youth does not, however, automatically equate to a lack of competence, understanding, or professionalism. We all have the same degree and we are all (in theory) devoted to public service, freedom of information, and equality of access. The fact that my crow's feet and laugh lines are slightly less defined than yours does not make me less of a librarian.

While most of the librarians I encounter have been open to young members of the profession, I do worry that the few who are not end up discouraging young librarians. Many of us chose this profession over other higher-paying choices because of the appeal of working in such a noble and freedom-oriented field. Being in the technology end of things I could easily move to an IT job, make twice as much, but not be as personally rewarded as I am working for a library. If I didn't work with an age-blind group of people from day to day, and if I were consistently called “the baby” as some of my young colleagues are, the IT side of the fence might start to look more appealing. And judging by the rancor and disillusionment I hear from other young librarians, I worry that the grass is looking a heck of a lot greener for a heck of a lot of young librarians these days—due in large part to the ageism we experience, whether it is intentional or not.

This profession needs an infusion of youth, if not for its new ideas and skills, then simply for its staffing. 55% of librarians are retiring in the next 15 years², and if we “young-uns” aren't around, then the profession will go the way of the dinosaurs, and it will no longer matter if I am 30 or 80—there won't be any librarians left.

² Mary Jo Lynch. “Reaching 65: Lots of Librarians Will Be There Soon.” *American Libraries*. March 2002. 55-56.