Roger Chabot
Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

Annabelle Drobniak
Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

LEAP OR STUMBLE? A STUDY OF LIBRARY PARAPROFESSIONALS HOLDING OR PURSUING THE MLIS DEGREE AND THEIR LIMINAL LABOUR (Paper)

Abstract

The phenomenon of underemployment of MLIS-degree holding paraprofessionals has not been seriously undertaken as a matter of research concern, except for a few mentions over the past half-century. This study reports on the partial findings of a survey of Canadian and American paraprofessionals who hold, or who are pursuing a graduate degree in LIS. This report seeks to explore whether a paraprofessional role can be considered a "stepping stone" to a professional role.

1. Introduction

Library labour is a perennial matter of concern for librarianship in its scholarship. There are long-standing threads of discussion in the literature exploring the nature of professionalism for librarians as well as related concerns such as the deprofessionalization of librarianship, the neoliberalization of library management, and the value of the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) degree (see, for example, Asheim 1978; Abbott 1998; Dilevko 2009; Hamerly and Crowley 2014).

Library paraprofessional labour is also occasionally a source of research concern (see, for example Howarth 1998; Dilkins and Ryan 2010; Zhu 2012; Hill 2014; James, Shamchuk, and Koch 2015; Lapidus et al. 2020). In the library and information science (LIS) literature, paraprofessional library workers are nearly universally characterized as library workers who lack the terminal master's degree in library science. An American Library Association-endorsed definition describes them as "library staff without professional certification" (Levine-Clark and Carter 2013, 188).

However, it is this liminal space between professional and paraprofessionals where there has yet to be significant research attention. Specifically, attention towards underemployed library professionals who have been unable to find titular librarian roles, and instead, are seeking employment in paraprofessional roles such as library assistants, library technicians, library clerks (or other similar non-professional roles) despite their advanced degree, which is a long-standing trend in library employment (O'Brien 1974; Ruzic 1999; Younger 2009; Carson 2004; Annoyed Librarian 2008; Remy 2015). Underemployment is defined as when "workers are employed in jobs which are substandard relative to their goals and expectations" and includes when workers "cannot get jobs which are commensurate with their education, skill levels, and experience" (Maynard and Feldman 2011, 1).

It is difficult to get a sense of how widespread the underemployment of MLIS degree holders is. The little evidence that does exists suggests that the extent of the underemployment of MLIS degree holders in libraries is at a rate between ten and twenty percent of library workers (Maata 2012; Department of Professional Employees 2021; Schilperoort, Quezada and Lezcano 2021). Additionally, personal accounts from websites, social media, and letters to the editor make it clear that real or perceived underemployment is a frequent matter of concern for MLIS holders, especially new graduates seeking employment within libraries (Hughes 2009; Hiring Librarians 2012; Tkacik 2012).

To investigate this understudied liminal space, we wanted to gather more evidence about the underemployment of those with the MLIS degree. The research questions that guided us were:

RQ1: What are the experiences of their underemployment as paraprofessionals?

RQ2: What are their professional ambitions and how are they going about achieving them?

RQ3: Do they view their underemployment as a stepping stone into professional roles?

We conducted an online survey to gather responses of MLIS-degree holders and pursuers who were working in paraprofessional roles. This extended abstract presents part of the results of our study.

2. Literature Review

Mentions of library underemployment in the literature spans a half-century, indicating that this has been a perennial issue in discussions on library labour. Personal advice to the underemployed is heavily featured in the literature. For instance, Clark (2014) and Woodward (2016) both suggest being purposefully underemployed to gain library skills. Ford (2011) suggests getting involved with library associations and asking about paid professional development opportunities in underemployed work. Babaloa and Abifarin (2014) suggest that graduates "be entrepreneurial." This worker-focused advice suggests how the underemployment of professionals has been made an individual concern rather than a systemic one.

A repeated cause of concern for the underemployment of professionals is that library schools are producing too many MLIS graduates which compounds the issue as there are too many individuals seeking out a limited number of professional roles (Annoyed Librarian 2008; Remy 2015; Bailey 2016; Wilkinson 2016). Graduates feel swindled, that schools are profiting off their willingness to enter a field knowing that many of them are unlikely to find positions working in libraries. Worker geographical immobility (Clark 2014) and restrictive union contracts (Dwyer 1988) are also listed non-personal contributors to the underemployment problem.

Lastly, underemployment of library professionals also contributes to systemic inequalities, as it is mentioned to be a specific barrier to the advancement of marginalized individuals' careers (Ford 2018; Anderson 2018). Wagner and Willms (2010) conclude that in order to diversify the profession there needs to be full-time professional librarian roles for marginalized individuals to be hired into. This is a profound irony as there are continual cries to diversify the profession (Black 2018).

3. Method

We first sought ethics approval from the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board to conduct the study. We constructed an online questionnaire that was hosted and

delivered by Qualtrics. Our survey questions derived from our own personal experiences working as MLIS holding paraprofessionals. We asked both selected-choice and open-ended questions that were sorted into the categories of demographics, their current position and active labour, their career motivations, and plans for future work. Inclusion criteria for our sample required participants to have the MLIS degree (or equivalent) or be currently pursuing it, be working as a paraprofessional in a library, and to live either in Canada or the United States. We chose to include MLIS students working as paraprofessionals, as well because we believed that they would have similar motivations and experiences to those who have graduated. We began recruitment on September 1, 2023. Our recruitment efforts were done via electronic channels. We created posts for the Facebook groups ALA Library Think Tank and Troublesome Catalogers and Magical Metadata Fairies; the r/Libraries subreddit, the CAPAL listserv and the Librarianship.ca organization shared on their website and as social media posts. We resent the recruitment communications as a reminder to these same venues on October 30, 2023, and closed the survey on November 30, 2023. We received a total of 125 responses, of which 97 were valid and met the inclusion criteria (30 were MLIS students, 67 were degree holders). The survey was designed in a way that participants could exit at any point or skip questions. In addition, we employed conditional logic in the survey that presented questions dependent on the previous answer. Therefore, the total responses for each survey question may not equal the number of total valid responses. Data were analyzed either using descriptive statistics or qualitative thematic analysis.

4. Findings and Discussion

A. Demographics

We first wanted to get a sense of who our paraprofessionals of interest are. Our participants could be said to be mostly in the "Millennial generation" (born 1980-1996, currently 28-44 years of age). This is significant because the phenomenon of underemployed professionals perhaps points to larger macroeconomic and societal issues. Figure 1 shows the number of responses in the age ranges from 18 to 61 plus years.
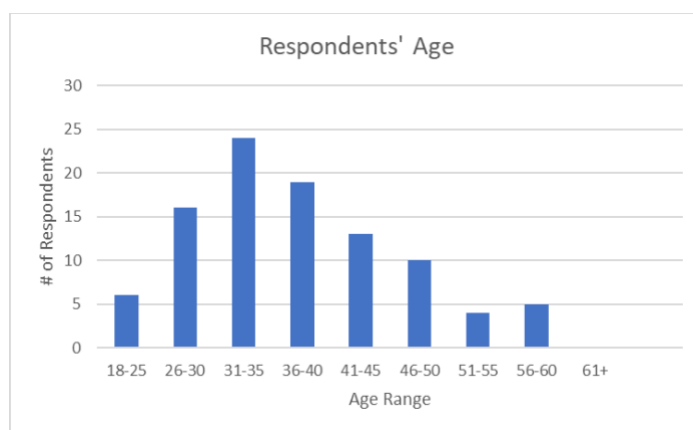

Figure 1

In terms of the gender of respondents, our sample mirrors the composition of librarianship profession overall (Department for Professional Employees 2021). Our respondents identified overwhelmingly as cisgender females. The problem of the status of librarianship as a "women's

profession" (Harris 1992) also could be said to extend to the paraprofessional as well. Figure 2 displays the breakdown our sample's gender identity.
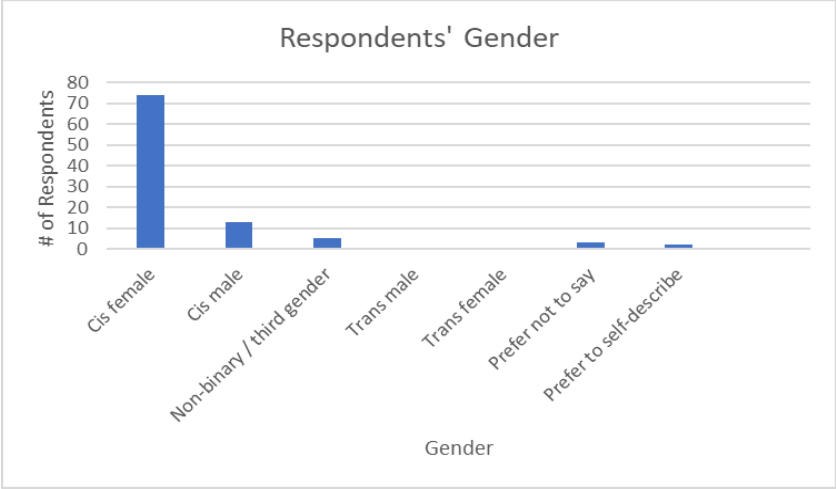

Figure 2

In terms of education, the MLIS degree (or equivalent) is the focus of our study. Of those who responded, 67 (69%) had already completed the MLIS degree, while 30 (31%) were actively pursuing the degree. Beyond the MLIS degree, we wanted to see what other educational qualifications MLIS-holding paraprofessionals possessed. We wanted to determine whether they possessed expertise beyond librarianship that they are bringing to their library roles. Ninety-one percent of respondents held bachelor's degrees while a smaller number held other advanced degrees. Figure 3 displays the educational attainments of our participants.
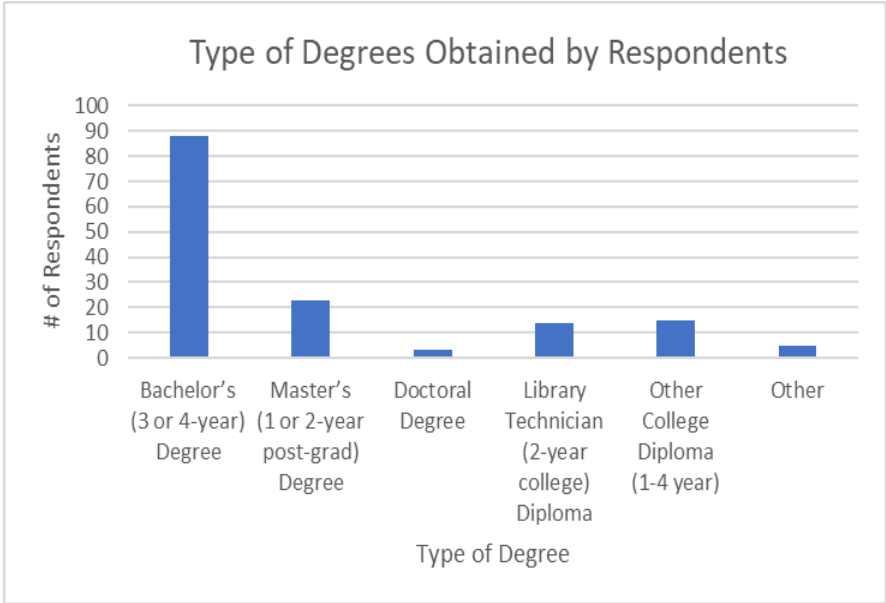

Figure 3

B. *Looking for Library Work*

To assess whether these paraprofessionals were using their paraprofessional role as a stepping stone, we asked them about their career aspirations and job seeking. We asked if they had the aspiration to become a titular librarian (that is, in a job role with the title "librarian"). Seventy-eight percent (n=73) of respondents indicated that they are, suggesting that they do not perceive their paraprofessional role as a terminal place in their career, while 21% (n=20) indicated that they were not.

For those who answered "no," they indicated several reasons why they are not pursuing a librarian position. The main reason was because they were content with their position as a library paraprofessional. Other reasons included work/life balance; being able to have a part-time position as a Library Assistant; disliking the research/service aspect of librarianship, and senior leadership's outdated view of paraprofessionals moving into librarian positions. Figure 4 summarizes the reasons why our participants were not pursuing librarian positions.
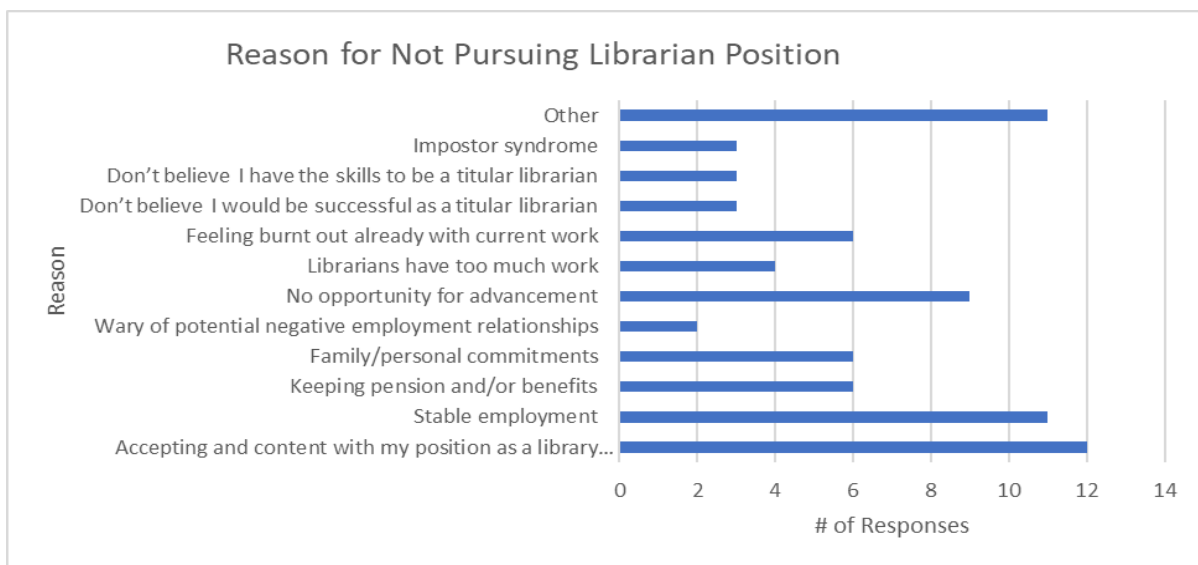

Figure 4

Despite the number of respondents who indicated that they were seeking a titular librarian role, only 54% (n=39) of respondents indicated they were *actively* looking and applying for a titular librarian role (45% indicated they were not). This further suggests that respondents are either content with the role they have, or, in the words of one respondent, "would consider [a position] if [the] right opportunity came up but [are] not actively seeking to be a titular librarian."

C. Is a Paraprofessional Role a Stepping Stone to a Librarian Role?

In this last section, we seek to understand the library labour of the paraprofessional role. Ostensibly, MLIS-holders and pursuers seek roles in libraries so that they can develop library experience or merely work in a library environment. By asking if respondents have ever done a task, project, or initiative outside of their job description, we sought to understand if MLIS-degree holders or pursuers take on labour that they believe will gain them professional experience while in their paraprofessional roles. These questions bring insight into whether MLIS-degree holders or pursuers in paraprofessional roles are being taken advantage of by their employer because they have the graduate degree-level knowledge and skills.

Question	Yes	No	Maybe
Have you ever done a task, project, or initiative outside of your job description?	73	15	
Would you ever do a task, project, or initiative outside of your job description?	4	1	9
Would you like to continue to do tasks, projects, or initiatives outside of your job description?	24	12	35

Figure 5

Considering 83% (n=73) of respondents reported taking on tasks outside their job description (see Figure 5), and 50% (n=42) feel exploited in their paraprofessional role (see Figure 6) because they believe doing professional-level work, we can assume that in some cases, MLIS-holding paraprofessionals are being exploited because they have the knowledge and skills to do professional-level work. In other cases, perhaps paraprofessionals do the work willingly to serve their own best interest of gaining professional experience.

Do you ever feel exploited in your role as a Library Assistant?	No. of Respondents
Yes, because I believe I am doing librarian level work	42
Yes, because my Library Assistant workload is too much	11
No	31
No Response	13

Figure 6

We were interested in evaluating whether institutions valued the professional status of those with the MLIS degree, so we sought to investigate whether institutions provided advancement opportunities for their degreed paraprofessional employees. It was positive to learn that the majority of respondents reported that there is opportunity for advancement within their institution (see Figure 7).

| Is there room for advancement at your institution?	No. of Respondents
Yes, please describe	45
Yes, but I'm not seeking advancement	12
No	27
No Response	13

Figure 7

Despite this, the majority of respondents (52% of applicable answers, n=42) reported that their institution does not *actively* support their motivation or intention to move into a librarian role from a paraprofessional role neither through mentorship nor direct training (see Figure 8).

Question	Yes	No	N/A	No Response

Does your institution, employer or supervisor actively support or mentor you in your desire or wish to move to a librarian role?	32	42	9	14

<div align="center">Figure 8</div>

Finally, we also explicitly asked participants whether they viewed their own paraprofessional role as a "stepping stone" to advance into a titular librarian role. Almost 60% of valid responses indicated that they viewed the role as such. For those that answered "no," likely explanations for not viewing the role as such were because of their contentment in their role as a library paraprofessional (see Figure 4).
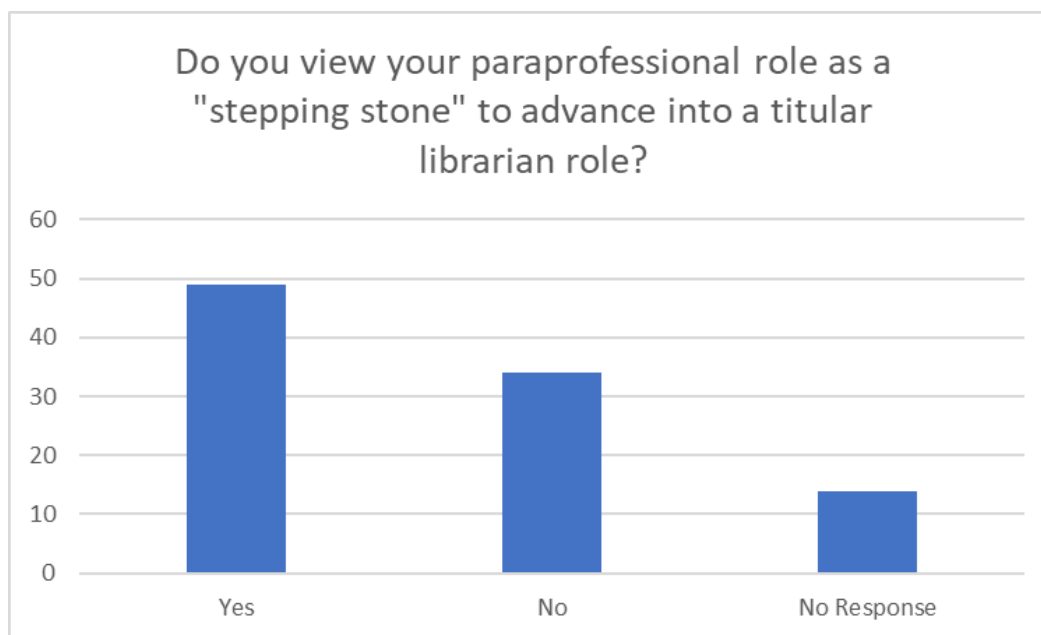
5. Conclusion

While our findings cannot be generalized, there is some evidence here to conclude that MLIS-degree holding or MLIS-degree pursuing paraprofessionals view their underemployment as a library paraprofessional as a "stepping stone" to a titular librarian role (RQ#1, RQ#3). Respondents seem to accept paraprofessional positions and gain professional librarian experience by taking on tasks outside their job description which may be considered "librarian work," believing it will benefit them in the future (RQ#2). However, the danger with taking a paraprofessional role is that the opportunities for developing as a professional may never come and therefore may be viewed as a career stumble rather than as a way to leap forward.

This study furthers the understanding that the division between what is considered professional work versus paraprofessional work is "fraught with tension" (Hill 2014, 23). However, as professional librarians often argue, it does not serve librarianship as a whole to allow paraprofessionals to take on professional duties as this may lead to fewer librarian roles in the future, as employers believe that they can download professional duties to paraprofessionals or staff their libraries uniquely with (cheaper) paraprofessionals (Litwin 2009). Concurrently, it is equally understandable that MLIS-degree holding and pursuing paraprofessionals want to gain

valuable experience working in libraries by taking on professional-level tasks outside of their job description. However, their pursuit of these skills impacts the professional status of librarianship and may simultaneously contribute to the reduction of the number of titular librarian positions that they are trying to achieve.

Our findings suggest that employers may view providing library assistants with MLIS professional-level duties as a form of mentorship or training, but perhaps this is not appropriate as it can be perceived as exploitative. If libraries are going to hire MLIS-degreed paraprofessionals, and benefit from their professional education and skills, then they should offer some sort of formal training or mentorship to make it more explicit that they, too, view the role as a stepping stone in a professional journey.

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