

**The Other "Librarian": Work Identity of Library Paraprofessionals  
from Preparation to Practice**

by

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## **Abstract**

The information age has had a significant impact on the traditional, collections-oriented work that defined libraries' purpose for centuries. The library has become a vibrant, socially-focused place of learning, digital technology, and community. Library paraprofessional duties are shifting from skills-based, technical roles and growing in scope and complexity, assuming tasks that traditionally have been performed by professional librarians. Previous research has reported that this crossover of roles and blurring of responsibilities creates tension and role ambiguity between librarians and paraprofessionals. As libraries have been transformed, current research has not explored the potential subsequent role changes for paraprofessionals and how this has affected their work identity; or, their sense of belonging, purpose, and value in the library workplace.

This collective case study examined the perceptions of work identity for practicing paraprofessionals in school, academic, and public libraries. The following research question guided this study: In what ways are library paraprofessionals' work identities formed? Specifically, (1) How do post-secondary programs that educate students to be library paraprofessionals shape their work identity? (2) How do relationships within a work context shape work identity in library paraprofessionals? (3) How do roles and responsibilities of library paraprofessionals shape their work identities? Work identity concepts were used in conjunction with, and under the framework of, social identity theory. The social identity approach explains the meanings associated with group membership, group behaviour, and intergroup relations that have emotional and value significance to the individual.

Data were gathered through 26 semi-structured interviews with library paraprofessionals in school, academic, and public libraries across central Alberta. The data was analyzed by identifying prominent themes from their descriptions of their experiences at work. These themes were discussed within the broad categories that make up work identity: personal influences, work relationships, and work activities. This study provides evidence that library paraprofessionals have a relatively stable work identity with a positive sense of purpose and belonging at work. However, certain long-standing job hierarchies, historical perceptions of the role of the paraprofessional, and structural workplace limitations inhibit a full realization of some paraprofessionals' potential. Library paraprofessionals, if mindful of all the things that can impact work identity, can make decisions on behaviour, actions and attitude that can help to heighten their sense of self and ultimately, feel good about the work they are doing.

This study has implications for post-secondary education in recruitment practices and in informing curriculum in paraprofessional programs. It may help to build greater awareness and insight into the work identity of a library paraprofessional that may in turn help both library workers and researchers to work towards better clarity surrounding this career and those who choose this career path. This study may help those in the library workplace become better aware of the needs of all workers in libraries, in particular library paraprofessionals, and may help library paraprofessionals to answer the question, "who am I at work?" with self-assurance and with pride in their contributions. The results of this study may prompt conversation about library workplace culture and relationships, with the ultimate desire that library staff, regardless of position, feel valued and fulfilled in their work.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original work by Norene Erickson. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “The ‘Other’ Librarian: Library Paraprofessionals From Preparation To Practice”, No. Pro00074412, August 1, 2017.

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my participants, who shared so openly and honestly, and from whom I learned so much. My hope is that this work encourages the entire library community to work together respectfully, collectively dedicated to the overall mission of libraries to serve our society. By recognizing and appreciating all of our unique skills as library workers and by remaining devoted to our love for learning, community, and for our fellow human being, the library can continue to be a safe and welcoming space. To all library technicians: stay passionate, confident, and devoted to your work. Libraries could not function without you.

## Acknowledgements

My decision to pursue a PhD was both impulsive and a predetermined destiny. Through life events, I came to a place where something felt undone; there was an empty space needing to be filled; a challenge not pursued. Somehow, suddenly, I had to do it. Yet at the same time it felt like it was always there, waiting for me to write it. Like many dissertation acknowledgements that have come before, I pay tribute to those who encouraged me along the way and as anyone who has completed this quest knows, there are many to thank.

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Thank you to my supportive and patient friends, from whom I all but disappeared from sight for several years. Thank you to my dear friend Michelle, who was always in my corner and to Angela, whose "of course you can do it, I never doubted it for a minute" attitude inspired my own confidence. Thank you, Mary, for giving me the inspiration (usually over wine) that I could do this, too. Thank you to my fellow PhD colleagues - Jonathan, Eva, and Sharon - we are bonded for life over this experience! Katherine, you've always enthusiastically listened to my updates and I am so glad we are friends. Lisa, thank you for holding down "the fort" while I took a year off to make this happen. You're next!

When I started my sabbatical year and began writing in earnest I also started volunteering for animal rescues. It has given me a huge emotional outlet and something "non-academic" that has brought unbelievable fulfillment and balance to my life. Thank you particularly to Christine, for trusting me to be a part of your rescue organization.

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## Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

*I was in grade six in 1976, attending a small country school. The library was in one room with creaking wooden floors and heavy bookshelves, laden with Nancy Drew, Judy Blume, The Bobbsey Twins, and books about cats and space. At least, those are the books I remember. I visited the library on a daily basis, hoping to see a new book about some girl somewhere who was just like me yet not like me at all. That is where I could escape into her parallel universe if only for a few hours. I volunteered every recess and noon hour, helped the librarian check in and check out books, and put the books back on the shelf. The little sign out cards went into a long wooden box, and when a book was returned, I would search through the little box, remove the card, and put it into the back pocket of the book. The routinized, predictable nature of the work was incredibly satisfying.*

*One day in late spring, the librarian had to go on an extended leave. There appeared to be no plans as to who would run the library, so a friend and I volunteered. For six weeks, we kept the library open, checking in and out books, helping students, and keeping the library tidy. When the librarian returned, she told us that she had dreaded walking in the first day to see a six-week accumulation of books waiting to be shelved, but instead returned to a pristine library. As a reward, we got to travel to the regional library that serviced rural school libraries and picked out new books for the collection. We brought a carload back to the library with us that ~~we~~ we had picked, and then we got to be the first to sign them out.*

*Other library workers have stories similar to mine. We share a personal and almost visceral connection to the library. To me, and to the participants in this study, the library is a space where you—anyone—can enter. There is no judgment of what you are doing there. No one blinks an eye when you take out “The Secret of the Old Clock” for the twenty-third time. It is a place where I caught a glimpse of the world that existed beyond Pigeon Lake, Alberta.*

*When I worked in that little school library, it was a place I valued and where the work I did was valued. I felt I belonged and no one judged me. It was the place where I discovered I wanted to work in libraries forever.*

The story of my early connection to libraries introduces this dissertation, which explores how library paraprofessionals shape their work identity. Growing up with positive experiences in libraries was one of the things that influenced the work identity of paraprofessionals in this study. Those experiences created a foundation for a sense of belonging, purpose and value at work. My own experience in library work has been extremely varied. I worked as a library clerk and then a cataloguing assistant, before taking a master's degree of library and information studies. After graduating I worked as a museum librarian, then many years in academic libraries. For the past fifteen years I have worked as an instructor and the coordinator of a two-year diploma program which trains individuals to work as library paraprofessionals; Canadian diploma programs and the library workplace largely refer to them as library technicians. For the purposes of this research, I use "paraprofessional" to describe library technicians, as this the predominant way to describe this category of worker in research literature and is a common term used across North American practices.

In this chapter, I will provide a background to the study including a statement of the problem. Then I will identify the research questions, provide context behind the study, and describe the theoretical framework around which the study will be examined. I will highlight the study's significance and the chapter will end with a summary of how this dissertation will be organized.

### **Background to the Study**

Recent studies in library and information sciences report both professional librarians and library paraprofessionals are experiencing a transformation in their traditionally distinct roles. Researchers argue that this is because of the changing landscape of the 21st century library, which is rapidly moving away from its

collections- oriented roots and becoming a vibrant, socially-focused place of learning, digital technology, and community (Bishop, Cadle, & Grubescic, 2015; Dinkins & Ryan, 2010; Gremmels, 2013; Zhu, 2012). Library paraprofessional duties appear to be shifting away from routine tasks and technically-focused roles, growing in scope and complexity, and reportedly assuming duties that traditionally have been performed by professional librarians (Dinkins & Ryan, 2010; James, Shamchuk, & Koch, 2015; Oberg, Mentges, McDermott, & Harusadangkul, 1992). It is said that, meanwhile, librarian roles are affected by new information technologies which have restructured the nature of the work they do (8Rs Research Team, 2005). In part, librarians are performing “an ever-widening array of tasks, performing management and leadership roles, and increasingly utilizing information technology” (8Rs Research Team, 2005, p.179) while library paraprofessionals are taking on more front-line duties and the higher levels of responsibility this entails (Froelich, 1998; Lankes, 2011; Litwin, 2009). Reports of a crossover of roles and a blurring of responsibilities can create tension and role ambiguity between librarians and paraprofessionals (Fragola, 2009; Hill, 2014). Historically, tension between the professional librarian and the library paraprofessional was brought on by a rigid hierarchical organizational structure (Lankes, 2011), and now role redefinitions exacerbate the issues. Previous discourse describing the library paraprofessional highlights the troubling undervaluing of this group of workers (Russell, 1985). Paraprofessionals themselves are often “discounted and underappreciated” (Lankes, 2011, p. 177) and some researchers believe librarians perceive paraprofessionals as a threat to professional ethics, core values, and to the professional librarian’s position in

society, as these paraprofessionals assume more public-facing roles (Froehlich, 1998; Lankes, 2011; Litwin, 2009).

Library paraprofessionals in Canada are trained in two-year diploma programs. These programs typically focus on developing the necessary technical skills required to support library operations (Canadian Library Association, 2011). Their job responsibilities are supportive in nature, and positions can exist in technical (behind-the-scenes work) or in public-facing services. The most recent Guidelines for the Education of Library Technicians, published by the Canadian Library Association (CLA), lists possible duties in these broad categories: acquisitions, cataloguing and indexing, selection of resources, circulation, reference, library programs, and technology work, among other tasks (CLA, 2011). Some library and information science researchers acknowledge the increasingly robust role of the library paraprofessional (Erickson & Shamchuk, 2017; Jacobs & Raju, 2008). Library paraprofessionals are assuming more complex tasks that were previously the domain of librarians, such as greater public service and outreach service work, instruction in library use, collection development work, and management or supervisory roles (DeLong, Sorensen, & Williamson, 2015). Work in technical services, or largely behind-the-scenes work in libraries, has also changed as paraprofessionals are doing the work previously reserved for librarians (Bordeianu & Seiser, 1999). Researchers are beginning to argue for a shift in post-secondary library paraprofessional education from a vocational, skills-based approach to a general education. It is argued this education should mirror the broader competencies required in the workplace—more sophisticated skills to prepare them for work requiring critical thinking and



independent decision

making (Erickson & Shamchuk, 2017; Jacobs & Raju, 2008; Raju, 2004). But these articles lack discussion on how this transforming library and subsequent role changes, within the context of historically subordinate work, may affect the paraprofessional's sense of identity, purpose, and value in the library workplace.

Work identity is a relatively new concept within organizational and industrial psychology that helps to frame how identities are influenced and develop through work activities, relationships, and personal attributes (Saayman & Crafford, 2011). It is unexplored in library and information sciences research and is one way in which to consider how library paraprofessionals conceive of their identity in a work setting. Work identity is made up of historical, personal, social, and organizational factors that contribute to the formation of an individual's identity (Buche, 2008). It is not just about what the individual does at work, but about the individual's self-concept and personal understanding of the work environment. Identity itself is a negotiated, continuous process, a narrative where people are "engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). Identity, and by extension work identity, is a fluid and continuous process; however, there is some stability of identity over time depending on the consistency of their situation. There may be "co-existing self-narratives" (Crafford, Adams, Saayman, & Vinkenburg, 2015, p.56) that allows for flexibility of self-perception and self-presentation. Changes or transitions in the workplace can adjust or create new identity characteristics in an individual. The ongoing negotiated process of identity amongst library paraprofessionals is evident in this study.

Library and information sciences research on the library workplace and identity has largely focused on professional librarians and their perspectives, but questions on paraprofessional experiences, and identity formation, remain unexplored. Work identity is a way in which to synthesize different identities together, including personal and social identities, in order to discover those facets of a paraprofessional that influence their perceptions of work and the “corresponding ways in which they behave when performing their work” (Bothma, Lloyd, & Khapova, 2015, p. 44).

Using a collective case study approach, I investigated the experiences of library paraprofessionals in multi-faceted and diverse settings. The purpose of this collective case study is to examine the perceptions of work identity for practicing paraprofessionals in school, academic, and public libraries. These three common types of libraries represent the typical environments in which library paraprofessionals are employed (8Rs Research Team, 2005). A collective case study approach, in the tradition of Stake (1995), provides a holistic exploration into the world of the library paraprofessional. This methodology allows for deep investigation into the complex world of library work, made up of the many variables that help to illuminate the perceptions of work identity in library paraprofessionals. A collective case study approach investigates the complexity of each of the three cases, “its people, activities, policies, strengths, problems, or relationships” (Stake, 2006, p. vi). However, while the cases were of major theoretical interest, insights were derived from the common stories of work identity that transcended individual cases and served to enhance my understanding of the experiences of library paraprofessionals at work.

## **Research Questions**

The following research question guided this study: In what ways are library paraprofessionals' work identities formed? Several sub-questions informed this research:

- How do post-secondary programs that educate students to be library paraprofessionals shape their work identity?
- How do relationships within a work context shape work identity in library paraprofessionals?
- How do roles and responsibilities of library paraprofessionals shape their work identities?

## **Context of the Study**

The information age has had a significant impact on the traditional and collections-oriented work that defined libraries' purpose for centuries. Budd (2008) attributes digital technology as influencing the "social, cultural, political, economic, and moral matters [which has] changed our lives and the way we live them" (p. 194). Growth in the use of digital technology has impacted and changed almost every element of library work. These changes include a move from print to digital resources, the automation of rote tasks such as cataloguing and acquisitions, and the digitization of information service practices and its impact on user behaviour, or, how people approach and use the library (Johnson, 1991; Gremmels, 2013).

Lankes (2016) argues, however, that the presence of digital technology does not need to affect the philosophy and core values that constitute a library--those principles which underpin the meaning of libraries. Digital technology has significantly changed libraries, but the roots of what a library represents in society and librarianship remain

the same: a core ideological base of “knowledge, community, and advancing the human condition” (Lankes, 2016, p. 3). According to Lankes (2016), what defines a modern library is not what it contains, but the actions and the people within the library—both employees and customers—define the space. Lankes (2011) contends, “a room full of books is simply a closet but an empty room with a librarian in it is a library” (p. 16). So, while digital technology is a driving force for change in how libraries go about their business, the philosophical purpose and the traditional functions of libraries remains the same (Lankes, 2016).

This philosophical purpose is represented by a set of core values that have defined professional librarianship in the modern history of North American libraries (ALA, 2004). The core values consist of beliefs and ideals that like core values in other professions, help to “guide actions, behaviors, and preferences” (Gorman, 2015, p. 10). The traditional core values of librarianship—such as service, intellectual freedom, and equity of access (ALA, 2004)—have provided for a consistency and foundation to how professional identity is perceived and defined. Yet technology has had some negative implications on the stability of the librarian’s identity. Hicks (2014b) argues “as the world changes, so does personal and professional identity” (p. 17) and in turn can influence the core values and meaning one associates with being a librarian. Technology has, in a sense, made the professional identity of librarians and subsequently, the nature of their work more tenuous.

It is important to understand how the library organization is situated within the broader western capitalist environment—how it is positioned within an economic and political system that favours globalization and values economic gains. The neoliberal argument that “markets ... are the most powerful information processors humanity has

even known” (Cope, 2014, p. 67) has relevance to library and information sciences. In a neoliberal hegemony, conceptions of information and knowledge are monetarily measured as opposed to library and information science philosophy where information and knowledge are a fundamental social right to freely access (Cope, 2014). This can pose certain threats to the work of libraries, affecting how information is produced, disseminated and organized (Cope, 2014). Knowledge itself becomes a product of economic value and affects how libraries go about their business. Further, technological innovations, strongly impacting library work, have propagated an economic and political agenda, straying away from the social progress agenda of libraries (Stevenson, 2011). Researchers are challenged with connecting the cornerstone of a library’s purpose—free access to knowledge and information—with neoliberal concepts of capitalism and the market economy. Some recent, critical analysis has focused on determining the effect of globalization and the capitalist agenda, on libraries and social change (Stevenson, 2011).

For the purposes of this study, we look to discussions on how the western capitalist assumptions of work and the commodification of work in a western society has influenced the organizational structure of the library and in turn, what impact it has had on both the limitations imposed and the opportunities presented to library paraprofessional work.

Librarianship has also been influenced by the “deprofessionalization movement”, which has impacted professional identity of librarians along with their perspectives on library paraprofessionals (Crowley, 2012; Litwin, 2009). Discourse surrounding the library paraprofessional is often framed within a class struggle perspective harkening back to the 1960s, where deprofessionalization as a result of the

rise of the semi-professional (such as librarians, nurses, and teachers) posed a threat to the salience and stability of the “traditional” professional such as doctors and lawyers (Litwin, 2009). This was good for the library profession, but soon the discussion in both scholarly and professional literature turned to the argument that management contributed to a different form of deprofessionalization by hiring non-professionals, that is, library paraprofessionals, to take over what was traditionally professional labour (Crowley, 2012; Litwin, 2009). The purpose of the so-called deprofessionalization was financial; to save money by hiring cheaper staff to accomplish work that was formerly professional labour (Crowley, 2012). The American Library Association (ALA), long committed to decades of work defending professionalism, fell short in recent years in not providing the resources needed to promote the value of a master’s level library education (Crowley, 2012). Meanwhile, library administrators are struggling to balance professional and paraprofessional positions as a result of economic pressures (Crowley, 2012). Authors such as Crowley (2012) and Litwin (2009) advise librarians to be “mindful of the threat” (Crowley, 2012, p. 52) of paraprofessionals infringing on professional librarian territory. These unsteady practices that line up professionals against paraprofessionals, and the perceived threats to the legitimacy of professional status amongst librarians, permeate recent research on professional-paraprofessional role conflict and relationships (Crowley, 2012; Fragola, 2009; Hill, 2011).

Librarianship has also struggled with gender stereotypes. It has been known as a “woman’s profession” since Melvil Dewey actively recruited women to this career at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Downey, 2010). It was viewed as a career appropriate for those who had nurturing characteristics, typically women, and

librarianship was bound by moral and cultural parameters of which women were seen more suitable than men to uphold these values (Stauffer, 2014). Women were also considered best suited for this profession because wages were lower for the female gender and so were the most affordable for a socially situated organization (Downey, 2010). These factors created a particular identity for librarianship, influenced by gender characteristics particularly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but these norms have endured to create a particular profile of “what is a librarian”. Stereotypes are rampant in this gendered profession, which also have served to denigrate and further generalize the necessary competencies for one interested in librarianship. It is further damaging to the profession that librarians are no longer a necessity in the digital age, and unsuitable for technological work because of the gendered reality that computer work is masculine work. Both computer technology and librarianship are bound by gendered traditions, but further exacerbated and limited by negative, cultural stereotypes of who is suited for these types of work (Carson & Little, 2014). Although research and discourse surrounding librarianship as a gendered profession are related to the profession side to library work, one can make a strong claim that all library staff are subject to the same cultural stereotypes and bound by the same historical gender divisions and assumptions. The influence of gender on the profession is evident in this study, where the female library paraprofessionals in this study made certain decisions to enter a library career based on some of these same social and cultural norms that the profession has been known for, in the past century. These norms, although influenced by gender, have created a particular identity for librarianship as a nurturing, helping career also tied to the educational role of the library. However this identity exists, irrespective of gender, as both male and female participants expressed similar,

personal connections to the nature of library work.

In response to perceived threats to the status of library professionals, conflicting paradigms regarding information and knowledge between a capitalist society and the traditional library, technological changes and challenges, and in an effort to define and articulate the terms around the library profession beyond its gendered history, research on library professional identity has been steadily growing. The study of library paraprofessionals, however, has been a severely under-scrutinized area. It is argued in this study that paraprofessional practices, similar to the professional practices of librarians, are “socially, culturally, and historically located and contextualized” (Hicks, 2016, p. 11). Paraprofessional actions, similar to professional librarians’ actions, are guided by the knowledge attained through education, historical-bounded structures, gendered restrictions, daily activities and social relations (Hicks, 2016). In order to understand the meaning behind the work library paraprofessionals do, and to aspire to a stronger sense of belonging and purpose, it would be beneficial to scrutinize the facets that construct library paraprofessional identity. It is time to pay attention to the library paraprofessional.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed and shaped by social identity theory, which has been used in this work to examine how library paraprofessionals create their work identities. The social significance in shaping work identity is represented by the notion that work identity is a “socially constructed representation of an individual’s self-perception of his/her own interactions within the employment environment” (Buche, 2008, p. 134). The social identity approach helps to identify and explain group membership, group behaviour, and intergroup relations (Hogg, 2005), which have both emotional and value



significance to the individual (Tajfel, 1972). Social identity theorists (Tajfel, 1972; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) emphasize the importance of group membership that gives individuals a sense of belonging and purpose in the work environment. Haslam (2004) studied social identity specifically within the psychology of organizations, which provides valuable insight as it helps in understanding how organizational structure, culture, and relationships influence identity.

Social identity theory helps to describe and to clarify the experiences of library paraprofessionals that shape their work identities. It helps to interpret and explain historical patterns of behaviour in paraprofessionals and provided a consistent framework in which to investigate where identity is influenced and shaped; for example, connections made during paraprofessional preparation, through relationships with librarians and other library staff, and through roles and responsibilities in a variety of library work environments. Social identity theory emphasizes group influence and how it can transform individual behaviour; it is seen as a “necessary good” and a positive effect on people’s identities (Haslam, 2004, p. 14). Because of the understudied nature of library paraprofessional work identity, social identity theory has helped to develop a fuller understanding of library paraprofessional experiences and what those experiences mean to the library work environment.

### **Significance of the Study**

Gaining insights into library paraprofessional experiences and how these experiences influence work identity has a number of important benefits. It will contribute to research about library paraprofessionals, which may help to develop more informed workers in libraries. This study also contributes to scholarly work on library paraprofessionals’ perceptions of their work identity, which may help to identify the

opportunities and future direction of the occupation. Research outcomes may also guide library paraprofessional education programs in better understanding the motivations and work practices of library paraprofessionals. As an educator, researcher and librarian, I hope my study prompts conversation about library workplace culture and relationships, with the ultimate desire to see library staff, regardless of position, feel valued and fulfilled from their work.

### **Overview of the Dissertation**

This chapter has introduced the work of library paraprofessionals and the problems stemming from the understudied nature of the formation of their work identities within libraries. Chapter Two discusses social identity theory as the theoretical framework for this study, and its capacity to facilitate exploration of library paraprofessionals' work identity. I will explain why work identity is a suitable and useful way in which to examine the experiences of library paraprofessionals. In Chapter Three, I share the relevant literature related to library paraprofessional experiences within the context of historical and contemporary practices in the library environment. Chapter Four describes the study's methodology; I outline case study methodology and the methods used to collect and analyze the data. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven describe the findings from (respectively) school, academic, and public libraries. The findings for each case are reported separately in order to draw out the unique characteristics of participants in each case yet allow for common threads to be discovered. There will be an effort to reconcile the particular and the universal (Huberman & Miles, 1998); to pay attention to each case's individual uniqueness yet consider the generalizations across all cases. I wish to preserve the uniqueness of each case (school, academic and public) yet make comparisons across cases, most easily

accomplished by first separating the cases into three. Chapter Eight is a discussion of the findings. It is arranged by the study's individual themes and connected themes will be grouped and discussed together in conjunction with the literature. The discussion will then be connected with the corresponding research sub questions. The final chapter highlights the implications of this study for both library paraprofessionals and libraries as a whole and concludes with recommendations for moving forward.

## **Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework**

This chapter discusses the construction of work identity as a viable way in which to understand the experiences of library paraprofessionals. Social identity theory, as a related theoretical framework, is described. I explain why this theory is a suitable framework in which to view the experiences of library paraprofessionals.

Work identity refers to how people perceive and classify themselves in a work environment (Buche, 2008). It is a relatively new way to conceptualize work behaviour (Jansen & Roodt, 2015) and the theory behind it helps to describe individuals' self-concept about themselves at work (Bothma, Lloyd, & Khapova, 2015). Work identity is used in conjunction with, and under the framework of, social identity theory. This theory was envisioned by social psychologists, Tajfel and Turner (1979), and further developed within the field of organizational psychology by Haslam (2004). In this study, social identity theory fulfills the intended purpose of a theoretical framework as “a story that gives you new insights and broadens your understanding of the phenomenon” (Anfara & Mertz, 2015, p. xvii). Social identity theory helps to describe and clarify paraprofessional work identity, explain historical patterns of behaviour, and provides a framework with which to interpret the data gathered from this study. The next section introduces the concept of work identity more fully and explains why this is a useful and effective way in which to view and understand the experiences of library paraprofessionals.

### **Work Identity**

Work identity is a socially constructed process and relates to how people perceive and classify themselves in a work environment (Buche, 2008). It is used in this study as a viable alternative to the concept of “professional identity”. Three types of knowledge

define a professional practice: “propositional, theoretical, and/or scientific knowledge that are unique to a profession” (Hicks, 2014a, p. 252). A profession consists of a theoretical base of knowledge, usually obtained through a lengthy educational process. There is typically an ethical code to practice and a societal recognition that this profession is valid (Nettlefold, 1989). In library and information sciences, the discourse surrounding the term ‘professional’ reserves this distinction for the holders of an accredited master’s degree in library and information science (Hicks, 2014b).

Jansen and Roodt (2015) consider the term work identity to be a relatively new way of conceptualizing work behaviour. It is grounded in both social and role identity theories (Jansen & Roodt, 2015). Lloyd, Roodt, and Odendaal (2011), in seeking a definition of work identity, emphasize the multi-faceted nature of the construction of self in the workplace. It is not simply how a person identifies with what they do at work; it is a broader sense of purpose and self: a “multilayered and multidimensional phenomenon that describes one’s self-concept and understanding of it in terms of the work role” (Bothma, et al., 2015, p. 44). Work is considered a significant, critical factor in the development of one’s personal identity (Bothma, et al., 2015; Abbott, 1988).

Only recently has identity been a topic of interest in management and organizational studies (Miscenko & Day, 2016). Even though there is a growing body of research on identity, as it is understood in the workplace, the research is fragmented. There are inconsistent interpretations and applications of various identity theories and lack of connection between the various concepts of identity (Currie, 2013; Miscenko & Day, 2016; Owens, 2003). Currie (2013) suggests a meta-theory (individual work identity, or IWI) to situate the concept of work identity within various theoretical perspectives, including social identity theory. Currie (2013) emphasizes group

membership in the development of a strong work identity, calling on social identity theory as a valid and suitable framework in which to study the intricacies of an individual's work identity. This way of incorporating group membership into the identity framework validates the use and signifies the importance of social identity theory within work identity and confirms this is a useful framework for this study.

Smith, Crafford, and Schurink's (2015) definition of work identity also confirms the social aspects of self-identification at work. Work identity is a multi-faceted concept; a combination of "finding identification in one's work domain, in other words with what one does, with whom one engages, and how one negotiates the dynamics of change" (p. 2). Swann, Johnson, and Bosson (2009) highlight connectedness as an important factor in the construction of work identity. Their research asserts that after an individual's economic needs, being connected to people at work and establishing strong social connections is one of the key functions of work (Swann, et al., 2009). Chalofsky (2010) adds the concept of value to work identity in emphasizing how important the work itself is to fulfillment and one's sense of self. This is precisely what my study seeks to do, in as transparent a way as possible. By using the theoretical concepts and research on work identity, I can examine the self-construction of identity of library paraprofessionals and use social identity theory in a complementary way to study the multiple facets—including relationship influences—to an individual's work identity.

An important concept within work identity is individual agency, or the way in which people express their personal identity at work. It is an "expression of personal identity, as it is mobilised and expressed in an active way to negotiate and address challenge in the environment" (Crafford, Adams, Saayman, and Vinkenburg, 2015, p. 62). Having individual agency refers to the ability to express one's uniqueness,

which is influenced by, and in turn continues to shape personal identity, which will have an effect on motivation, self-esteem, and how work is conceptualized (Crafford, et al., 2015).

Giddens (1991) proposes a reciprocal relationship between social structure and individual agency. In the context of identity work, there is tension as people mobilise their individual agency, or individual motivations to suit their personal needs while at the same time operate within specific social situations in which there are certain practices, roles and expectations (Crafford, et al., 2015). It is referred to in work identity literature as the tension between uniqueness and belonging (Crafford, et al., 2015). This is also important to note in this current study as I investigate how the individual balances their own personal needs and expectations with that of the social group in which they work. Identity work occurs as the individual attempts to balance their personal identity with the social environment in which they work. Having a strong social connection with those at work helps people to make sense of their environment and figure out their place within it (Walsh & Gordon, 2008).

It is also important to recognize that work identity is an ongoing negotiation within the self. It is not separate *from* the individual; it is created *by* the individual. Work identities “do not just happen but can be consciously and purposefully developed by an individual” (Roodt, Jansen, & Crous, 2015, p. 14). As described in Chapter One, identity is a negotiated, continuous process. It is an ongoing narrative where people are engaged in a constant construction of their identity—who am I and who am I at work?—a goal of producing “a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). Researchers agree there is some stability of identity over time depending on the consistency of an individual’s situation; the more stable and

predictable the work environment, the more consistent and stable the worker's identity. There may be "co-existing self-narratives" (Crafford, et al., 2015, p. 56) that allow for flexibility on how one views and presents oneself. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) suggest that people have co-existing self-narratives, depending on the situation, in order for people to be flexible in their presentation of self, and able to respond to different contexts and interactions. In addition, Beech (2008) suggests that there are factors that can influence and change work identity; notably emotions, cognitions and power relations.

Work identity and individual identity have a reciprocal relationship; identity influences how one goes about their work while at the same time, work influences a person's individual identity. A career may be chosen based on one's personal interests, but the occupational environment can also influence personal traits and identity (Miscenko & Day, 2016). And while one may lack control over certain components of one's work, conscious decisions can be made as to the identity one wishes to assume, in order to develop and maintain a strong and positive sense of self (Roodt, et al., 2015).

Saayman and Crafford (2011) have provided a useful framework in which to investigate work identity for the current study. Three aspects form work identity: work activities (or roles), relationships, and personal characteristics, and "the formative events that influence who we become" (p. 1). For the purposes of this study, postsecondary education can be viewed as one of the formative events that influences work identity (Saayman & Crafford, 2011). In their formative research around these three aspects, Saayman and Crafford (2011) conducted interviews with employees of a South African manufacturing company and found that the employees' personal attributes and characteristics, those "relatively stable components of personhood seated in personality"



(Crafford, et al., 2015, p. 61) factor heavily into an individual's work identity. These components are, for example, personal attributes and characteristics one is born with, personal areas of interest or motivation, personal history, and value systems (Crafford, et al., 2015). I add the concept of post-secondary education for library paraprofessionals, as part of an individual's personal history that affects work identity.

Work identity brings together various identities; personal, social, and organizational, and these identities are negotiated in a way that allows an individual to determine "who they are at work". There are also factors in the work environment and more broadly in the world that can threaten and destabilize work identity (Saayman & Crafford, 2011). There are demands and tensions in the workplace, in our "turbulent and multifaceted world" (Saayman & Crafford, 2011, p.1) that cause individuals to have to renegotiate their work identity. Job security (where the employee feels powerless to maintain a sense of continuity with their position) can be a factor influencing work identity (de Braine & Roodt, 2015). Employees who feel insecure in their jobs are less engaged in their work (de Braine & Roodt, 2015). Job insecurity can also exist in precarious work, which means "uncertain, unstable, and insecure [work] in which employees bear the risks of work and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections" (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017, p. 1). Hierarchical structures can be a threat to the stabilization of identity, even if the organization is progressive, avoiding "conspicuous hierarchical symbolism" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 631). Individuals may struggle with positioning themselves in a superior/subordinate environment, particularly one that sends a mixed message that the organization is one big team (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Library work environments typically are hierarchical so the findings from this study may help in understanding how this hierarchical structure

may impact a paraprofessional's identity. By analyzing the data collected in this study, I hope to discover what tensions and demands exist that both negatively and positively affect the construction of work identity in library paraprofessionals.

### **Social Identity Theory**

Social identity develops when two or more individuals form a group, and they arrive at a general consensus as to the group's definition, its attributes, and a similar understanding on what membership in the group means (Hogg, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity is different from personal identity; personal identity focuses on individual personal traits and an understanding of one's self not shared with other people (Abrams, Frings, & de Moura, 2005). According to social identity theory, groups give people a sense of belongingness and purpose (Tajfel, 1972). Tajfel (1972) conceptualized the social identity approach as "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" (p. 292). Tajfel and Turner (1979) conceived of social identity theory in response to a perceived gap in knowledge surrounding interpersonal behaviours and responses within the context of social processes. Focus within social psychology had, up to that point, been on interpersonal processes that led to prejudicial or discriminatory behaviour (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) but not on the social processes that influenced the development of those behaviours.

Use of social identity theory is prevalent in research surrounding professions that struggle to establish value and a strong voice (Willetts & Clarke, 2014). Willetts and Clarke considered belongingness to be a critical factor in the social and professional identity of nurses. In the case of this research, I am looking at identity as socially constructed; that is, identity as it is shaped by intergroup relations that influence the

library paraprofessionals' sense of self and how paraprofessionals situate themselves within the library workplace. Social identity is distinct from professional identity, which focuses on how an individual identifies within the specific practices that define a profession (Hicks, 2014a). Exploring paraprofessional identity as a social construct will allow access to and highlight the social elements that influence identity construction.

Social identity theory is an important framework for understanding organizational behaviour (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam, 2004). Over the past three decades, social identity theory has been well researched in social psychology and organizational psychology literature (Haslam, 2004). It has been valuable in helping researchers understand social behaviour within the context of an organization (Alvesson, et al., 2008; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam, 2004; Hogg, 2005). Of particular interest for this study, social identity theory can be used to provide a framework in which to investigate social behaviour in the library workplace. As founding theorist Turner states in the preface to Haslam's (2004) text, "psychological group membership can be a positive and productive organizational force" (p. xvii). Those individuals with strong social identities are, therefore, potentially more productive and optimistic workers. This is in contrast to earlier psychological theories, where group influence was said to produce irrational behaviour, and group submersion was at the expense of the individual self (Haslam, 2004). In other words, group influences were seen as inherently bad, instead of good (Haslam, 2004). Social identity theory does not align with this belief. In his foreword, Turner describes the self as operating at a higher level of rational behaviour, a more "socially inclusive self, a change of self, not a loss of self" (Haslam, 2004, p. xvii).

## **In-Group Bias**

There are threats to maintaining a stable (that is, predictable and confident) social identity at work. Central to Tajfel and Turner's (1979) thesis is the notion of in-group bias. Empirical evidence from their early work showed that merely belonging to a particular group causes discrimination in favour of that group, at the exclusion of the out-group. In other words, there is an automatic 'us versus them' mentality as a result of social categorization. It is important to note, however, that strong affiliation with a particular group does not automatically lead to discriminatory behaviour. This type of reaction to other groups will occur only if the "intergroup relations are in some way insecure" (Haslam, 2004, p. 27). In an ideal situation, there exists a healthy balance between group identity and intergroup relations. Of interest in this study is how in-group mentality plays out in library organizations.

## **Self-Categorization Theory**

The concepts of social identification and intergroup behaviour as described by social identity theorists are fitting frameworks in which to investigate library paraprofessionals. It provides a way to understand how individual and group behaviours form and what motivates future behaviours. The social categories in library work are distinct because of historically structured divisions between professional and paraprofessional education and because of employment practices that favour hierarchical arrangements. Therefore, we can legitimately examine behaviour (and perceptions) of library paraprofessionals within the context of these social categories. However, the process of categorizing is not necessarily as linear as a job title or academic credential. Social identity theory also recognizes the role of self in understanding and evaluating those groups to whom one belongs. Self-categorization theory, a subset of social identity

theory, offers a way in which to understand this process (Hogg, 2016).

Self-categorization theory recognizes the process in which the individual categorizes, or makes sense of, the social group to which one belongs (Hogg, 2016; Turner, 1982). It helps to explain the cognitive process by which these social identities are formed and become salient. Self-categorization theory helps to connect personal and social identity; it helps to answer the question “what makes people define themselves in terms of one group membership rather than another?” (Haslam, 2004, p. 28).

Self-categorization theory was also developed to provide a fuller explanation of the interpersonal-intergroup continuum (Haslam, 2004). Turner (1982) hypothesized that self-concept (and thus definition of self) lay on a continuum between interpersonal and intergroup identity. Thus, “interpersonal behaviour is associated with a salient personal identity and intergroup behaviour with a salient social identity” (Haslam, 2004, p. 29). Turner (1982) further contributed the idea of depersonalization, meaning there is a psychological process that allows a person to switch off personal identity and turn on social identity. As the social influence grows, personal uniqueness diminishes. Or as Burke and Stets (2009) describe, the stronger the social influence the greater the instance of depersonalization. What happens is “the self comes to be perceived as categorically interchangeable with other in-group members” (Haslam, 2004, p. 30), which Turner referred to as self-stereotyping. In a somewhat more encouraging description of the process, Hogg and Rinella (2018) consider that people are motivated to establish a shared identity as it gives them a strong sense of belonging somewhere. By categorizing ourselves (and others), we “depersonalize perception to create an in-group membership-based sense of shared identity and shared reality” (Hogg & Rinella, 2018, p. 6). Shared reality is an inherent desire for people because this is how we validate our beliefs,

attitudes, and values (Hogg & Rinella, 2018). This important subset of self-categorization, known as depersonalization, was investigated in this study.

## **Summary**

This chapter has introduced work identity as a framework in which to study the experiences of library paraprofessionals. Social identity theory was introduced as the theoretical framework and it was explained how social identity theory can provide valuable insight into the construction of a library paraprofessional's work identity.

In order to study these various ways of conceptualizing library paraprofessional work identity, it is important to understand the environment in which the library paraprofessional resides. In the next chapter, the scholarly literature related to library paraprofessional experiences within the context of historical and contemporary practices in the library environment is examined. Four major areas are addressed in the next chapter: how a library paraprofessional is described and is situated within the library work environment; the progression of paraprofessional education including recent perspectives on preparatory education philosophies; the roles, status, and responsibilities of library paraprofessionals; and the relationship of library paraprofessionals to professional librarians.

## **Chapter Three: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I provide a survey of the literature related to library paraprofessional experiences within the context of historical and contemporary practices in the library environment. Four major sections are presented. The first section will be an introduction to the world of the library paraprofessional including historical and contemporary descriptions of the paraprofessional, public perceptions of library work, librarianship as a gendered profession, choosing a paraprofessional career and postsecondary programs for the library paraprofessional. The second section will discuss the current landscape, including changing roles of the library paraprofessional and recent perspectives on preparatory education as a result of those changing roles. The third section will include literature on the broader context of libraries within a western society neoliberal landscape. It will continue with a discussion of the literature on relationships in the library workplace between librarians and library paraprofessionals, including persistent discussions surrounding deprofessionalization and core values which both impact the dynamics of the relationship. The section concludes with a presentation of the literature on job satisfaction related to how librarians and library paraprofessionals view their work in light of all the previous issues that have been presented. In the fourth and final section, work identity literature in other paraprofessional disciplines will be presented in order to situate the library paraprofessional in the broader paraprofessional work environment.

### **Section A: The World of the Library Paraprofessional**

#### **Describing a library paraprofessional.**

Most research about library paraprofessionals encompasses workplace roles and

the changing nature of paraprofessional work in a highly structured library organization (see for example, Cox & Myers, 2010; Dinkins & Ryan, 2010; Gremmels, 2013; James, Shamchuk, & Koch, 2015; Zhu, 2012). However, there is a lack of clarity of what constitutes a library paraprofessional and no clear definition or certainty of future roles. Here, I will examine how this category of worker has historically been described and contemplated. This will be helpful in understanding the paraprofessional's relative context in the library organization.

“Library paraprofessional” is a generic and somewhat ambiguous term used consistently in scholarly inquiry but not as often in workplace practice. It is synonymous with terms more commonly used in libraries, particularly in Canada, such as library technician, library assistant, library technician assistant, library clerk or the generic ‘support staff’ (ALA, 1997; Davidson-Arnott & Kay, 1998). Nettlefold (1989) argues that ‘library clerk’ is not synonymous with library paraprofessional; a paraprofessional has specific training with tasks that are unique to a library environment whereas library clerks are generalists with no specific library training outside of the workplace. The paraprofessional is most often defined as a hierarchical category of worker under the supervision of a professional librarian; the relationship between the two is explored later in this paper. Definitions in the literature often focus on where the paraprofessional is situated in relation to other staff, not on personal skill attributes or core educational requirements (see for example, CLA, 2011). Hierarchical expressions dominate with definitions provided by library associations, such as the Canadian Library Association's definition describing paraprofessionals as “[playing] an important role in a library staff, occupying a position with a level of responsibility between that of a clerk and a librarian” (CLA, 2011, p. 2). Similarly, the American Library Association (ALA), which



is the largest and the oldest library association in the world, describes the library paraprofessional as working “under the supervision of a librarian, although they often work independently” (ALA, 2017, para. 5). In the scholarly literature, Evans (1979), writing one of the few papers examining library paraprofessional history, explains that “function, not title or training, is the distinguishing characteristic of the paraprofessional class” (p. 68), and that this function is to relieve librarians of technical, nonprofessional duties. In addition, Oberg (1992) describes a three-tiered system where “paraprofessionals occupy the middle stratum ... within this model, paraprofessionals are ranked below librarians, but above clerical employees” (p. 100). There is vagueness to some of the literature where paraprofessionals are the focus of the study, yet their position or qualifications are undefined. For example, in the Dinkins and Ryan (2010) study, the one paraprofessional participant of the study appeared to have a college education but not library-specific training, yet conclusions on whether a paraprofessional could or should staff the academic reference desk were made based on this one individual who lacked formal library training.

The issue of definition confusion has surfaced in some research studies (Erb & Erb, 2015; Johnson, 1991; Oberg, 1992; Oberg, Mentges, McDermott, & Harusadangkul, 1992; Zhu, 2012). Library paraprofessionals, surveyed in Oberg’s (1992) study, found the use of the term “paraprofessional” confusing as well as disconcerting because it steadfastly segregates the work of paraprofessionals from professional staff. Some preferred the term “support professionals” while others were concerned that “support” meant clerical work. Within Oberg, et al.’s (1992) study, respondents to the survey expressed confusion over what exactly was a paraprofessional. As the researchers expressed, “the lack of a less ambiguous shared definition of the term paraprofessional is

a factor that can limit research” (Oberg, et al., 1992, p. 237) because there lacks clarity in who precisely is being studied.

The ALA (2006) recognizes that categorizing this level of worker is problematic to the paraprofessional’s sense of value in the workplace. The Association acknowledges the unsatisfactory terminology, including use of the term “clerk” when investigating terminology for support staff. ALA (2006) states “While [they] will use [the term clerk] when talking about themselves, they do not do so with any satisfaction” (para. 1). It goes on to say “Further, the terms used most generally by librarians and paraprofessionals alike frequently have a negative impact on paraprofessional morale” (para. 4). The ALA is referring to terms such as “clerks”, or “non-professionals”, which is said to impact the morale of library paraprofessionals (ALA, 2006).

There is obviously some confusion and a lack of an agreed-upon definition for what constitutes a library paraprofessional. Public perceptions of library work, including enduring stereotypes of librarians and library workers contributes to the nebulous identity.

### **Public perceptions of library work**

Public perceptions of library work also may influence the paraprofessional’s work identity as they negotiate their roles in libraries vis-a-vis the librarian and shifting responsibilities. To the uninformed public, everyone who works in a library is a librarian. The stereotypical images of a librarian endure: the “older, single, white woman, generally accoutered with one or more of the following; cardigan, pearls, tweed skirt, hair in a bun and spectacles perched on the nose” (Luthmann, 2007, p. 775).

Library paraprofessionals may arguably be included in these perceptions as they fill a substantial number of public-facing roles in libraries (DeLong, Sorensen, & Williamson,

2015). This may impact the library paraprofessional's work identity (that is, who am I at work?) when they encounter these misconceptions from others, namely those outside the sphere of library work. Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou (2014) found, from their systematic review of public perceptions of library work that stereotypes are deeply rooted in historical impressions of library work and will take some time to change. The authors encourage librarians, and library schools, to actively communicate a more accurate image of the work they do, in order to change these public perceptions that serve to diminish and harm the profession.

There is substantial research on what draws an individual to want to work in libraries. This will be explored more fully later in this chapter but is noted here as a factor in perceptions of library work. Research that attributes a love of books and reading to an interest in a library career, such as that found in Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, Vassilakaki, and Tsatsaroni's (2015) work may seem to play into the outdated and traditional image of librarians as "bookworms". Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al. (2015) encourage the reader to see it differently; that it is "continuity where the technological developments are integrated with more traditional aspects of information work" (p. 602). However, stereotypes prevail as evidenced by several studies (Hicks, 2016; McMenemy & Luthmann, 2007; Nilsen & Mckechnie, 2002; Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014; Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2014). A Canadian study focused on the "hidden" work of librarians and how the public, particularly library users, are oblivious to the complexity of the career (Nilsen & Mckechnie, 2002). This study places part of the blame on a lack of knowledge that not all library workers are librarians. The professional nature of the work is hidden from the public since much of what professional librarians do is behind the scenes. Role blurring between librarians and

library paraprofessionals also magnifies the issue (Nilsen & McKechnie, 2002; Oberg, et al., 2002). There are enduring stereotypes of librarianship that serve to harm public perception but also create somewhat of an identity crisis for professional librarians themselves (Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014). For example, the aforementioned “bunned librarian”, but also the “sexy librarian”, tattoos and librarians, cat lady, introverts and bookworms have all been prevailing images and characteristics attributed to that of the librarian (Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014). It is argued that library paraprofessionals, closely intertwined with and undistinguished from the librarian, may face similar roadblocks in their public image and add confusion to their own identity.

It is also necessary to consider not only how enduring stereotypes can influence identity formulation, but how librarianship as a gendered profession has permeated modern library history and factors into identity.

### **Librarianship as a gendered profession.**

Librarianship is a profession where women have historically outnumbered men, particularly at lower ranks rather than in directorship or chief librarian roles (Downey, 2010). But what began as a largely masculine profession has switched to a predominately female profession in the last century (Ray & Paul, 2013), with the majority of librarians being female. Melvil Dewey actively recruited woman into the profession at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, based on the assumption that women performed better in more nurturing roles (such as in helping professions such as librarianship), and women could be paid less than men (Downey, 2010). Women were in fact drawn to the profession in mid-century, during wartime, because of the moral and cultural aspects to librarianship (Stauffer, 2014). Librarianship was viewed as similar to teaching, and public library work included educational services to the working class; in particular, their

children (Stauffer, 2014). In this sense, women were in charge of the creation of their own professional identity, within the cultural, normative parameters placed on women during that time period. This is critical to note because it demonstrates that outside forces did not impose an identity on librarians; librarians created it for themselves as a natural expression of their gender and class identity of the time (Stauffer, 2014).

Similar to other semi-professions typically comprised of women, librarians have struggled with status recognition (Neigel, 2016). It is no coincidence that professions, such as nursing, education, and librarianship, are typically referred to as “semi-professions” and are predominately female (Litwin, 2009). This semi-professional status has been further solidified and demonstrated through post-secondary education where attempts to legitimize the profession as a profession, through creation of master’s level studies, have largely come up short in creating a public conscience that recognizes that legitimacy (Neigel, 2016). The historically low status of both women and the semi-profession itself has contributed to the lack of status for librarianship (Ray & Paul, 2013).

Status issues are not only prominent between librarians and the broader professional landscape but also within the library workplace itself, between library workers. Neigel (2016) discusses the polarity between librarians and other library staff in professional development opportunities. Library paraprofessionals are often disadvantaged not only because of limitations to further education because of the disparity between costs and their income, but also because of a limit to opportunities as a paraprofessional. Not only is the legitimacy of the gendered profession of librarianship called in to question but status within the library workplace is challenged as those “less than” librarian struggle for value recognition and compensation (Neigel, 2016).

The wage division persisted in all types of libraries throughout the century with

vertical divisions of labour where men dominated the higher, more prestigious positions and women were at the bottom of the library hierarchy (Downey, 2010). Further, as computer technology, a historically predominantly male occupation, became omniscient in library work, gender divisions were magnified because of a perceived disconnect between the traditional, nurturing characteristics of librarianship with the calculated and analytic work of computing (Carson & Little, 2014; Downey, 2010).

Feminist scholars have recognized the centrality of gender disparity in librarianship. However, they have been criticized for not challenging the hierarchical structure and power systems that are framed in a masculine discourse (Stauffer, 2014). Some of these expressions of professionalism are considered “impartial, impersonal, and hierarchical” (Stauffer, 2014, p. 255), a reflection of western, male dominated cultural norms of professions in organizations (libraries included). Stauffer (2014) refers to authors such as Roma Harris and Mary Niles Maack, who call for librarians to “regain control over their occupation” (p. 255) and aim for a “true egalitarian distribution of power and prestige within the workplace” (p. 255). The profession, even with feminist scholars, is articulated with masculine discourse.

In light of these somewhat controversial perceptions of the status of librarianship and library work, it is useful, for this study, to consider what then draws someone to this career. This is a largely unexplored area with library paraprofessionals; however, the research for professional librarians is substantial and of relevance for this study.

### **Choosing a library paraprofessional career.**

Most of the research on choosing a career in libraries is centered on librarians, or those who pursued a graduate-level degree in library and information sciences (see, for example, Jones, 2010; Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, et al., 2015; Shannon, 2008; Walker

& Calvert, 2016). Murray and Carroll's (2010) Australian study may be the only library and information science-specific research into reasons for choosing a library paraprofessional designation over a master's level. Murray and Carroll focused on individuals who already had an undergraduate degree and may have chosen a graduate-level library education but instead, deliberately chose the vocational route. In their study they found the main reason a vocational rather than a graduate-level education was chosen is because the participants wanted a practical, skills-based program, and believed it would get them a job faster (Murray & Carroll, 2010). There were other pragmatic considerations such as the cheaper cost and shorter length of the program, but the most common reason was that a skills-based program would lead quickly to employment (Murray & Carroll, 2010). It would be enlightening for library paraprofessional and graduate level education programs if a similar study were conducted in Canada. The latest statistics, gathered by the 8R's study reported 61% of paraprofessionals in Canadian libraries have an undergraduate degree, and this percentage has increased since the first 8R's report in 2004 (DeLong, Sorensen, & Williamson, 2015). This information would help educational programs to better understand the motivations of those who wish to pursue a career in libraries.

Other research has focused on what motivates those who choose a graduate-level library education. In a study of school librarians (qualifications are undefined) in New Zealand, it was found that flexible hours and the promise of work/life balance were primary factors in choosing a career in school libraries (Walker & Calvert, 2016). But while these practical reasons may have attracted individuals to the profession in the beginning, the gratifying nature of the work itself—or what library work involves—has sustained interest in this career. Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, et al. (2015) identified

other reasons in the findings of their research. They found that the primary motivators for pursuing a career in library and information science were a love of books and reading, the nature of the work itself, and an interest in helping people (Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, et al., 2015). In 2008, a professor from the School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Carolina conducted a study of school media specialists (school librarians) in order to assist with recruitment strategies for the graduate school. Similar to the previous study mentioned, this study found that personal, intrinsic interests played a factor in their decision; notably, a lifelong passion for books and reading, a connection to the nature of the work of libraries, and a desire to work or help people. The participants also appreciated the work/life balance and flexibility that came with working in a school library (Shannon, 2008). A similar study centered on school librarians, or graduate-level educated librarians found that the participants chose a career in libraries because of their positive, early history with reading and books (Jones, 2010). As children, these participants were frequent library users, and some worked in libraries in a non-librarian capacity before choosing to enter graduate school. Other factors that drew school librarians in this study to library work was a connection to the nature of the work of libraries and a desire to work with, or help people (Jones, 2010).

Similar findings were present in another study of students enrolled in the Information and Library Studies program in Wales where it was also discovered that a love of books is one of the major factors that drew those participants to library work (Simon & Taylor, 2011). The authors emphasize that there was more complexity than merely a love of books; there is also a value attachment to books as a conduit to providing information and a sharing with the community. This desire to share and provide information is connected to the other factor these authors discovered which is the



desire to help people, an “enjoyment of research and solving problems, aiding learning, and satisfaction at being of help or service to others” (Simon & Taylor, 2011, p. 8809). Some of the participants in the study mentioned a personal, lifelong connection to library work saying they were born to be a librarian, although they sometimes took a circuitous route to get there, choosing other careers first. Rathbun-Grubb and Marshall (2009) discovered similar results with participants who chose a career as a public librarian. Their participants were drawn to the public library because they viewed it as a good fit with their interests in working with people; not only do they enjoy public service, but their reasons were altruistic in that they hope to make a difference in people’s lives (Rathbun-Grubb & Marshall, 2009).

Sare, Bales and Neville’s (2012) investigation of new academic libraries found some unique reasons why a career in academic libraries was chosen. Participants viewed librarianship as a “positive, noble, career move” (Sare, et al., 2012, p. 184). Not only that, librarianship was the realization and culmination of their self; in a sense it was self-actualization. It meshed with so many aspects of their self-identity: desire to help people, an appreciation and love of libraries and the library environment, and the standard “love of books and reading” also came into play. But after a year or two as a professional librarian in an academic library, it became apparent there were other reasons for perceiving a fit; namely, they enjoyed the intellectual environment and the challenges presented with the research process. One participant found the work “novel and energizing” (Sare, et al., 2012, p. 196). This indicates there are some connections to specific library environments that occur after the person has chosen a particular library route, but most come into the profession with very similar interests. Although all of these studies involve graduate-level librarians, the current study will investigate whether

similarities exist with those who have chosen a library paraprofessional career. Work identity is inextricably tied to personal identity, or, “those relatively stable components of personhood seating in personality [and] personal history” (Crafford, et al., 2015, p. 61). “Who am I?” is a precursor to “Who am I at work?”. By studying the personal characteristics that attract someone to this career, we can better understand the motivators that influence their behaviour at work and perspectives about work.

Masdonati, Fournier, and Lahrizi (2017) studied individuals who chose a vocational education path. The study was unrelated to any particular discipline or career, but looked at why a vocational path was chosen, particularly with individuals who already had postsecondary training and could have chosen any number of academic routes. The researchers discovered that their participants chose a vocational career in order to obtain a better quality of life and to attain personal growth, which a vocational career was thought to offer. Participants were also looking for work that closely related to their core life values (Masdonati, et al., 2017). This particular study was not specifically around library work; it was general to career changes in vocational education and training. However, the findings in library and information science literature are similar in that intrinsic reasons rank high as primary motivators for choosing a graduate level library education. Motivations underpinning library paraprofessionals’ decision to take library technician training, outside of Murray and Carroll’s Australian study, remain unexplored.

Another area to explore, in order to get a clear picture of the world of the library paraprofessional, is the postsecondary educational system that trains library paraprofessionals. The following subsection will explore the history of educational programs in the United States and Canada, as these are the geographic areas that have

most impacted the world of the library paraprofessional in Canada.

### **Postsecondary programs for the library paraprofessional.**

There is a perplexing amount of controversy and a persistent negative attitude surrounding paraprofessional education (Duff, 1994; Lynch, 2008; Nettlefold, 1989; Oberg, 1992). In the first part of the 20th century, in the United States, it was generally agreed that differing educational levels for those who work in libraries was necessary. The consensus in historical studies on professional librarian education is that it first resembled an apprenticeship program (Lynch, 2008). This formed the foundation for professional education. *The Williamson Report* in 1923 outlined a two-tiered system, distinguishing professional work from clerical work (Lynch, 2008). Williamson suggested undergraduate education with one-year post-graduate training for librarians, and for clerks, a high school education plus a short library-specific training session (Lynch, 2008). While professional education became standardized, library paraprofessional training did not and in the United States it is not often a requirement of jobs in libraries (Lynch, 2008). Williamson's recommendations for a two-tiered system were later criticized for lacking further divisions between strictly clerical work, and work that required specific library training. While Williamson's recommendations may have helped to clarify work roles, the delineation of responsibilities "effectively closed the discussion [on specific paraprofessionals training] for decades" (Younger, 1996, p. 30).

It would be, in fact, several decades before paraprofessional education programs received widespread attention from the library profession (Oberg, 1992), and not until 1971 that the American Library Association provided written criteria for the establishment of what were called library/media technical assistant programs (Nettlefold,

1989). Many of the paraprofessional programs that began in this time period did not survive because they did not receive support or recognition from the library profession nor from the American Library Association (Nettlefold, 1989). The American Library Association is in part responsible for the demise of these programs and contributed to the controversial history of paraprofessional education in the United States. As a result of undisclosed disagreements, an ALA-recognized library technician program closed in 1949, which is said to have created, in the Association, a “persistent negative attitude” (Wilson & Hermanson, 1988, p. 476). In fact, in 1965, the ALA “took a stand discouraging two-year programs as producing ‘cheap librarians’” (Wilson & Hermanson, 1988, p. 476). It was assumed this resistance to paraprofessional education was in response to a perceived threat to the employment of librarians (Evans, 1979; Shores, 1968). In the ALA Library Education Division (1965) newsletter, the association stated, “the consensus of Board opinion is that the establishment of courses for the training of library clerks or assistants in junior colleges should not be encouraged” (p. 21). However, a shift in attitude began with the expansion of the bachelor’s level library science degree to a master’s level, opening up room for diploma-level training. Because of this educational shift, there was what might be considered a library paraprofessional movement in the United States in the late 1960s. Government initiatives led to program development at the community college level (Johnson, 1991).

There was some clarity surrounding paraprofessional education in the early 1970s, led by two seminal guideline documents produced by the American Library Association. These documents reflected the ALA’s willingness to take the lead in establishing guidelines that would help to standardize and legitimize paraprofessional education. The first document, *Library Education and Personnel Utilization*, classified

library workers into two groups: professional and supportive. The supportive group had several classes: library associate and associate specialist (requiring a bachelor's degree in some form), then in a class requiring less qualifications, library technical assistant and technical assistant. Staff in these categories was required to have at minimum two years of college but no specific credential as a result (Evans, 1979). A lower category of clerk also existed, which required no formal education. According to Evans (1979), the main strength of this policy was it provided a distinction between various support staff qualifications and recognized the competencies required of higher-level (or what later became known as paraprofessional) work.

A subsequent document published by the ALA Library Personnel Resources Standing Committee on Library Education (1991), slightly countered the first set of guidelines. Instead of laying out a direction for formal education, the document emphasized on-the-job training or continuing education after hiring. The level and amount of education would be determined at the local or institutional level, resulting in a great variety of qualifications and educational requirements. This document, on the basic education of support staff, also acknowledged that formal paraprofessional education had been slow to gain acceptance or recognition in the library profession (ALA, 1991).

In 2002, the American Library Association revised a 1970 document, *Library and Information Studies and Human Resource Utilization*, and in it, the Association made it clear they would provide some guidelines, but it was up to the individual libraries to define what the training and education should be of staff from clerical to paraprofessional to professional (ALA, 2002; Erb & Erb, 2015). Clearly delineated categories were created, with paraprofessionals divided into “library associates” and “library assistants”

(ALA, 2002). The American Library Association envisioned this two-class system within the paraprofessional designation; the recommendation for a library associate education was undergraduate education with a broad, liberal arts focus and vocational, technical skills training for the library assistant (ALA, 2002). As with other ALA documents, these guidelines were not strictly followed by library organizations or by library education systems, which continued to develop programs based on regional competency requirements (Brine, 2016). Individual colleges were left to devise their own curriculum and as such, there is great variety in paraprofessional program curricula and professional qualifications to teach in these programs (Johnson, 1991). These examples throughout the history of 20th century library education in the United States represent the lack of a general consensus on paraprofessional education. Unlike professional librarianship, which enjoys stable, well-established, educational criteria, paraprofessional education—at least in the United States—remains ambiguous.

Formal education for library paraprofessionals in Canada has been slightly more anchored. However, the library community was at first indifferent and even opposed to the idea of a formally established academic credential for this group (Weihs, 1977). The librarian who advocated for the first Canadian program at the Manitoba Institute of Technology in 1962 wrote, “in spite of some opposition from professional librarians the trustees stated that there was a place in public libraries for training assistants of a sub-professional standard” (Perrin, as cited in Weihs, 1977, p. 421). The CLA has consistently provided guidelines for the education of library technicians (the common description for the paraprofessional in Canada). The first set of guidelines was written in 1966 and was last revised in 2011. This has helped provide some stability and consistency across educational institutions in Canada (Duff, 1994). The guidelines were

first published at a time that coincided with the development of the community college system, which provided a home for vocational-focused education (Duff, 1994). After the opening of several more diploma-level programs, the Canadian Library Association's 1966 convention was the venue for further discussion on the education of paraprofessionals, stating, "there is a clear call for specific training at the library technician level" (Munro, as cited in Weihs, 1977, p. 422). Since that time the common credential in Canada is a recognized two-year diploma from a college or university.

There are well-recognized differences on what separates a library paraprofessional education from a professional library education. The educational streams are often distinguished philosophically; a liberal arts or general education is emphasized as a necessary background for professional librarianship and a vocational education focus is attached to paraprofessional preparation (Raju, 2004). A general education, such as that received by a professional librarian in their undergraduate preparation, provides intellectual preparation and cultivates the mind, whereas vocational education provides specific skill preparation to do a particular job (Raju, 2004). A hierarchy is emphasized through expressions of this philosophical contrast. It is a strongly held assumption that the theoretical foundations of library and information science are "assumed to be professional concerns and are not included in the [paraprofessional] curriculum" (Moriarty, 1982, p. 238). The CLA affirms this philosophical difference by stating, "librarians are taught to understand the relationship of the task at hand ... to the role of the library in society, while library technicians are taught to understand how tasks fit into an individual library's operation with emphasis on task performance rather than theory" (CLA, 1989, p. 6). The ALA perspective is similar in their description by

emphasizing “special technical skills” as the focus of paraprofessional education (ALA Committee on Education, 2004, p. 5). Paraprofessional training must emphasize skills-based training and provides minimal theory (Davidson- Arnott & Kay, 1998; Howarth, 1998).

These issues around the education of a library paraprofessional have created confusion on where and how paraprofessionals are situated within the library organization. The issues are magnified because of the hierarchical environment of the library organization and because of different educational standards across countries and even across library organizations. Confusing and inconsistent terminology used to describe the paraprofessional has not been resolved. Some encourage stronger definition formation; that the paraprofessional appointment must distinguish itself more clearly from professional work as well as from clerical work (Howarth, 1998; Oberg, 1992). It must “maintain an appropriately broad, but clearly identifiable, niche to demarcate this from other levels of staff” (Howarth, 1998, p. 538). Others advocate changing the distinction altogether (Leong & Davidson, 2011).

According to social identity theory, an unclear membership in a social category could have implications for the paraprofessional’s belongingness, purpose and sense of value in the workplace (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Haslam, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Adding to this ambiguity in paraprofessional definitions is evidence of role and responsibility changes, which may further affect social categorization and consequently, the library paraprofessional’s sense of purpose and value in the organization. This will be explored later, but it is important to first consider the broader economic, social, and political landscape which influences libraries and library professions.



## **Section B: Current Landscape**

### **Libraries in a neoliberal society.**

Emerging critical interpretations on the influence of neoliberalism in libraries provide a wider perspective on practices regarding organizational structure, operations, and current conceptions of information (see, for example, Buschman, 2013; Buschman, 2017; Cope, 2014; Quinn & Bates, 2017). The concept of neoliberalism is complex but the basic, broad beliefs are that there is “no longer a distinction between market and state, between the public and private, and between the individual and the social” (Saunders, 2010). To the library organization, these perspectives show how a capitalist agenda in western society can come into conflict with the social values that anchor library work. In a democratic society such as Canada’s, the library’s purpose is to provide access to the wide array of information that is available. Libraries provide access to this information without economic benefit, an activity in opposition to capitalist notions of commodification of information. Cope (2014) suggests there are “subtle ways in which the neoliberal conceptions of markets and society undergirds contemporary systems of information production, dissemination, and organization” (p. 70) that compromise the underlying values and ideology of libraries. The effect of the market economy and neoliberal ideology shows in both library management practices and how library resources and services are conceptualized and delivered (Stevenson, 2011). Stevenson (2011) contends there is tension between the traditional function of the library as a social sphere and capitalist tendencies to commodify information and services. A library freely available to the public, with equally free access to professional services and uninhibited access to information helps to stabilize our social and economic system. However, this is challenged by the neoliberal perspective that views the customer as an “information

producer-consumer” (p. 787) and an increased view of the commercialization of library services (Stevenson, 2011).

Through a neoliberal lens, information is monetized, but libraries typically approach access to information as a basic human right. Here lies the dilemma in terms of managing library practices while balancing contrasting ideologies. Both the academic and the public library are the subject of most of the discussion on neoliberalism and the institution of libraries. Quinn and Bates (2017) consider the influence of neoliberal values on higher education, and on how the academic library is viewed in terms of its role and function. They argue the commodification of education has placed a monetary value on the library and taken away from its symbolic and practical importance. Thus, in academic settings, the tendency is for library management to make strategic decisions based on a corporate business management perspective, which is to think of the library as a competitive and market-oriented entity (Quinn & Bates, 2017). We see this play out, for instance, with library job titles such as “Information Officers” or “Knowledge Managers” (Quinn & Bates, 2017). The library is redefined as a corporate department and away from the traditional repository of information. The impact is also seen with new specializations in library education, such as information policy, courses in knowledge management, and health informatics, for example (Stevenson, 2011).

Approaches to education are also shifting, as evidenced by the emergence of the i-school (Stevenson, 2011) where the connection between information and technology is emphasized. All of these factors may influence the positioning of the library paraprofessional, in an environment that may rationalize and make decisions based on corporate gain.

Similarly, recent critical studies surrounding public libraries demonstrate the

effect of the neoliberal state on how the organization is configured and managed. The public library, arguably more than other types of libraries, is strongly conceptualized as a public space and a social good. Researchers such as Stevenson (2011) are concerned with how western political and economic systems are in conflict with the social values of the public library. What Stevenson (2011) refers to as the “neoliberal project” (p. 773) challenges the fundamental social system in which the library is grounded. Impositions of hierarchical status and power permeate library organizational culture and threaten to degrade the educational and social mission of libraries (Stauffer, 2014). These forces threaten to degenerate the identity of the profession, which has been built on a strong cultural and social value system. The key, according to Stevenson, is not to oppose these capitalist forces, but to be keenly alert to how the capitalistic and commodity-driven perspective may influence the strategic direction of the organization and more importantly, aware of the effect on the ideological backbone of the library.

Technological innovations in particular have propagated an economic and political agenda, straying away from the social progress agenda of libraries and it is imperative to recognize the power of this trend, in order to “engage in current policy debates with eyes wide open” (Stevenson, 2011, p. 788). As Buschman (2017) argues, strategic priorities need to be shaped through an “inclusive discourse across the whole spectrum of the organization” (p. 266) or run the risk of a top-down process which is both uninformed and biased towards historical practices. All of these factors do not just impact professional librarians; they play into the positioning of the library paraprofessional as issues of gender, power, and hierarchy are omniscient throughout the library organization. The construction of the librarian—as a gendered, socially grounded yet precariously professional identity—has laid the groundwork for how all might view

their place in the library regardless of position or status. Issues of gender will be explored in a later section of this chapter.

Inclusivity is a key approach to merge the expectations of a market economy with the social value that motivates the library organization to do their work, and for which the library is known. The library as an organization will falter in a market economy without appreciating and being directed by the belief that every member of the library staff can make a strategic contribution to the library (Buschman, 2017). Buschman (2013) refers to Aristotle, who proposed that there is always a political element to every human action, including actions of power, relationships, and security.

Those who set the direction for the library organization need to think politically in terms of how we are viewed by the library community—how good of an investment we are to our stakeholders—which is dependent on how well staff function together. A more positive and collaborative organizational climate will influence how external players value the library and how individual employees value their position within the library.

### **Changing roles.**

With inconsistencies in library paraprofessional preparatory programs and the lack of a shared, agreed-upon definition for library paraprofessionals, it is no surprise that library workplaces have often been unable to clearly define and differentiate between library paraprofessional and professional librarian roles and tasks. Literature surrounding library paraprofessional work expresses some confusion around workplace responsibilities, particularly the division between paraprofessional and professional labour. Growth in paraprofessional duties, which over time have begun to border on professional work, are generally considered a positive and logical progression of library labour that is continually impacted by technological changes and advancements.

Oberg et al.'s (1992) study of academic library paraprofessionals found that paraprofessional responsibilities were growing and becoming more complex with few duties off limits to paraprofessionals. These duties that were formerly the “exclusive preserve of librarians [were] now routinely assigned to paraprofessionals” (Oberg et al., 1992, p. 232). But researchers emphasize the need for clarity of responsibilities and a lessening of ambiguity in paraprofessional roles (Cox & Myers, 2010; Gremmels, 2013; James, Shamchuk, & Koch, 2015; Oberg, 1992; Younger, 1996; Zhu, 2012). From a social identity perspective, these role changes may contradict the long-standing hierarchical structure, confusing the boundaries between professional and paraprofessional, and send a mixed message as to where the paraprofessional socially belongs within the organization. There are implications for both professional and paraprofessional identity in this changing environment, with the paraprofessional arguably in a more vulnerable position because of the limitations regarding what roles and responsibilities they are assigned (Zhu, 2012).

There has been much discussion in the last two decades on the increased complexity of library paraprofessional roles and responsibilities, with some persistent concerns. Ambiguity in role definition of both library paraprofessionals and librarians is at the root of many researchers' queries (Dinkins & Ryan, 2010; Gremmels, 2013; Johnson, 1991; Oberg, 1992). There is a general consensus that professional librarians are taking on more administrative duties, strategic decision making, and involved in organizing change, leaving paraprofessionals to assume some of the higher-level tasks that were previously managed by librarians (8Rs Research Team, 2005; Cox & Myers, 2010; DeLong, et. al., 2015; Johnson, 1991; Zhu, 2012). For example, paraprofessionals are more intricately involved in day-to-day decisions and operations, performing more

complex cataloguing procedures in technical services (Bordeianu & Seiser, 1999), doing supervision and management duties, and heavily involved in work in reference and public service work. Meanwhile, professional librarians are involved in big picture planning, outreach work, and managerial operations such as staff training (Cox & Myers, 2010; Johnson, 1991; Oberg, 1992). This assumption of roles by the paraprofessionals was viewed as a threat to the roles and position of professional librarians (Russell, 1985). By the time technological changes in libraries were in full swing, this seemed to pose less of a threat as professional librarians assumed other tasks (Zhu, 2012) and role blurring became more of a perceived issue.

Changes in roles are largely attributed to “technological advances, budget cuts, reorganization, downsizing, outsourcing, expanded roles of professionals, and changes in the information world” (Zhu, 2012, p. 127). There is no question that the digital world in which libraries exist has fundamentally changed the work of library staff. This dynamic environment requires a flexible and open approach to staffing, and it needs to be recognized that paraprofessionals should be a better-defined and distinctive category of worker (Erb & Erb, 2015). Researchers suggest that professional librarians and library paraprofessionals have largely the same complex duties assigned to them, roles are expanding, and “the lines between professional duties and paraprofessional duties have blurred” (Zhu, 2012, p. 141). Two studies, ten years apart on Canadian human resources in libraries found strong overlap between professional librarian tasks and library paraprofessionals, particularly with regards to public service work (8Rs Research Team, 2005; DeLong, et al., 2015). Some researchers are concerned that paraprofessional training, as it stands now, is insufficient in preparing the library paraprofessional for the more complex roles they are taking on, particularly with regards to public service work

(Han & Chaudhry, 2000). Oberg et al.'s (1992) study, affirmed many years later in Zhu's (2012) study, recommended philosophical and practical adjustments to how library work is viewed and distributed with Zhu (2012) suggesting a re-examination of roles because separation of roles may no longer be sufficient. A greater focus should be on the development of necessary skills, regardless of title (Zhu, 2012). Researchers agree there should be at minimum clearer understandings of roles in order to clarify who does what (Cox & Myers, 2010). At the same time, there is some concern over adequate compensation for paraprofessionals, stating that higher-level work requires higher-level pay (Cox & Myers, 2010).

Some researchers suggest a re-definition of the paraprofessional is required to reflect the new reality of increased responsibilities, moving away from a support staff mentality to a new category of complementary yet separate professional (Erb & Erb, 2015). The authors ponder whether "a new class of library professionals should emerge in the future or if it is simply time to erode the professional/paraprofessional distinction altogether" (Erb & Erb, 2015, p. 414). There is enough empirical evidence to suggest that a dramatic shift of the paraprofessional's roles and responsibilities is occurring. This has influenced recent perspectives and changes to library paraprofessional education.

### **Recent perspectives on preparatory education.**

The increased complexity of paraprofessional roles and responsibilities has ignited some discussion surrounding new approaches to paraprofessional education. It has become increasingly obvious that a change in library paraprofessional education may be necessary in order to encompass newly required competencies (Erickson & Shamchuk, 2017). This includes adding a stronger theoretical base to preparatory programs, similar to graduate-level library education (Davidson-Arnott & Kay, 1998; Erickson &

Shamchuk, 2017; Jacobs & Raju, 2008; Wilson & Hermanson, 1998). Paraprofessionals are assuming managerial positions along with other high-level roles, so “the need for skills that, at least partially, define professional librarianship increases” (Jacobs & Raju, 2008, p. 5). A more advanced skill set is required, one in which the current vocational education structure may not be able to address. A Canadian study found, through a survey of professional librarians and library paraprofessionals, the most needed skill development involved “personal competencies rather than strictly applied skills, which are largely outside the domain of educational programs” (8Rs Research Team, 2006, p. 108). The research team recommended that paraprofessional curriculum reflect a balance between “general, IT, public service and communication skills course offerings” (8Rs Research Team, 2006, p. 108). Some believe that it is primarily educational qualifications, not roles or abilities, that separate library paraprofessional and professional librarians (Jacobs & Raju, 2008) and that a renegotiation of these differences will benefit the library work environment as a whole. Paraprofessionals, in their more complex roles, require critical-thinking skill development, or, the development of “practical reason [and] the ability to cope with change, to exercise judgment, to problem-solve effectively, to understand their activities within the wider contexts of the LIS profession and communities served” (Jacobs & Raju, 2008, p. 11). It is unclear how refocusing paraprofessional education might affect the paraprofessionals’ work identity.

The next section will discuss the literature surrounding relationships between, primarily, librarians and library paraprofessionals and provide a foundation in which to understand the factors that have historically and are currently impacting working relationships.



## **Section C: Relationships and Factors Impacting Relationships**

### **Relationship between librarians and library paraprofessionals.**

Role changes and role blurring have been explored substantially in library and information sciences literature, but there is less research examining the working relationship between librarians and library paraprofessionals. Russell (1985) explains the lack of scholarly literature on these relationships by hypothesizing, “librarians have been so concerned with their own standing that they have cared little about their assistants” (p. 296). Russell is referring to the pestering debate surrounding professional status for librarians. While not the subject of this dissertation, is important to mention that librarians have been questioned and entertained challenges to their own identity as professionals, and this helps to explain the lack of attention librarians have given to others in the workplace.

There are a few studies that directly investigate the relationship between the librarian and the library paraprofessional where paraprofessionals were interviewed as part of the study (see, for example, Fragola, 2009; Hill, 2014). Fragola’s (2009) study focused on the concept of in-group bias, or social behaviour as a result of favouring one’s in-group. Fragola conducted a case study of both library paraprofessionals and librarians at a public library in North Carolina. Both groups were interviewed about their perceptions of their relationship with each other in order to determine if an in-group bias exists with librarians, specifically. Fragola (2009) argues that because of blurring responsibilities, as evidenced by recent studies, it is advantageous to the workplace to minimize in-group bias as much as possible. Furthermore, Hill (2014) interviewed over 200 library workers in Australia to ascertain their perceptions of working relationships between librarians and library technicians, as they are called in the study, and found that tensions exist between librarians and library paraprofessionals in part because of blurring

roles and responsibilities.

Some studies place blame on one side or the other contributing to further tensions. In Litwin's (2009) study, management is called into question with their deliberate attempts to combine or blur the roles between professionals and others, by calling all staff members "professionals". Litwin (2009) argues that this action helps to "exploit the class tensions" (p. 44). It is maintained in library and information science literature that professionalism is defined by an intrinsic skill set and reserved for those with training in and a deeper connection to ethical behaviour. These characteristics are presumably developed within graduate level education (Drabinski, 2016; Froehlich, 1998; Litwin, 2009; Wilson & Hermanson, 1998). Litwin (2009) concludes that a library paraprofessional should not assume professional status, despite the increasing complexity in the nature of paraprofessional work, because it undercuts the education librarians have taken to establish their professional status.

Some place blame on paraprofessionals themselves for causing the tension; they say paraprofessionals are creating an argument for inclusion into the same roles as librarians and are "focused on career advancement and elevated status and little else" (Litwin, 2009, p. 57). Crowley (2012) views paraprofessional and professional role overlap as a threat to librarianship itself stating, "librarians must have the courage to challenge the use (and misuse) of paraprofessionals in the public library, even as we redefine and assert our professional roles" (p. 52). This perception is understandable when viewed in an historical context. It is common for the library paraprofessional to be described as subordinate and distinct from those holding professional status. Researchers have taken note of this in describing professional librarians as fearing for their job security as a result of the growing competencies of the paraprofessional (Duff, 1994).

Russell (1985) describes the literature of the time as having a “distinctly patronizing attitude, an assumption that they know what is best for these people without the need to ask” (p. 301). For example, Moriarity (1982) emphasizes, “the library technician must be comfortable in the paraprofessional role, able to take pride in their distinctive but not professional status” (p. 238). Some literature demonstrates a protectionist attitude towards professionalism and this often plays out with negative discourse surrounding the paraprofessional (Martinez, 1995). As a result, it is said that paraprofessionals have lived years of feeling like “second class citizens” (Martinez, 1995, p. 40). These studies, although decades old are examples of the discourse prevalent throughout library and information science literature. Presently, there is still a “perceived tension” (Fragola, 2009, p. 17) between the two groups of workers, but this is not a universally agreed upon perspective. Furthermore, the issue of deprofessionalization has also exacerbated tension among library workers, and this will be explored next.

### **Deprofessionalization.**

Within the context of librarianship, Crowley (2012) defines deprofessionalization as “the elimination or downgrading of the status of professionally educated librarians ... through their replacement in whole or in part with less-educated staff or volunteers” (p. x). Deprofessionalization is considered a genuine threat to professional librarian status and values (Litwin, 2009). Similar to other fields such as medicine and social work, deprofessionalization impacted the social system of libraries at the time when society began to reject professional authority and embrace alternatives to these hierarchical, and strongly established institutions (Litwin, 2009). Crowley (2012) places some of the blame on library management and administration, which replaced so-called traditional librarian work with technology, but then have not yet assigned new duties to the

librarian. Litwin (2009) also blames management in focusing on business outcomes (for example, through hiring ‘cheaper’ alternatives to librarians) and downgrading the expertise and professional work ethic that librarians bring to the job (Litwin, 2009). Crowley (2012) cautions, librarians should be “mindful of the threat” (p. 52) posed by deprofessionalization. Litwin (2009) refers to it as the “paraprofessional movement” (p. 43), which also places the blame on the actions of paraprofessionals in wanting elevated status but without the educational preparation that professional librarians must have. Public library administrators are also criticized for taking a “bottom-line, short term approach” (Crowley, 2012, p. 51) in hiring paraprofessionals to perform professional work. Again, technological changes are at play, particularly with reference and technical work, where library work requires less specialization and knowledge (for example, more straight-forward search techniques as a result of technological tools such as easily-searched library databases) (Crowley, 2012). These tensions have led to a re-examination of what constitutes a ‘professional’ and what distinguishes professional librarianship from paraprofessional work.

There are other pragmatic perceived threats to the librarian’s professionalism, amidst discussions of technological transformations. The modern-day library and quality library service is threatened by funding cuts and the world financial crisis (Crowley, 2012). Reports from the beginning of this century expose an under funding and reduction of resources for Canadian school libraries (Statistics Canada, 2003) that has continued to present day. The American Library Association (2011) noted job loss and the inability of new professionals to secure library positions. A decline in staffing of school libraries, significant budget cuts to academic libraries, and reductions in government funding for public libraries are all viewed as contributors to a

deprofessionalization movement that is perceived to undercut the work professional librarians do, to damage their sense of identity, and to impact library worker relationships (Crowley, 2012).

There are counter arguments worthy of mention. During the heart of the unrest caused by the so-called “deprofessionalization movement” of the 1960s, Haug and Sussman (1969) studied the relationship between clients and professionals. They saw deprofessionalization as a benefit to society, which forced the professional to release previously held power and concentrate instead on a more informed and equitable society (Litwin, 2009). Nonetheless, library and information science scholarship appear to reject this notion, arguably because of the precarious claim to professionalism in the first place. Some of the uncertainty is attributed to the female domination of librarianship that already reduces it to semi-professional status (Abbott, 1998; Harris, 1992; Litwin, 2009). Librarianship is also grouped in with other so-called “semi” professions such as social work, nursing, and teaching (Litwin, 2009). These semi-professions have a specialized knowledge base but are said to lack the rigorous entry requirements and control over the work attributed to true professionals, such as medical doctors or lawyers (Litwin, 2009). It is no coincidence that those professions considered semi are largely female-dominated. Together with the prejudice associated with a feminized profession, and the grouping of librarianship with other professions that strive for recognition as professionals, librarians seem to have struggled to establish a clear identity (Abbott, 1998). Moreover, stereotypical images of librarianship are seen as undermining the value of librarianship and therefore diminishing claims of professionalism for this career (Seminelli, 2016). Much of the literature purporting to examine the professional identity of librarians is about

“professional image, status, and reputation of librarianship” (Hicks, 2016, p. 20). In other words, the literature focuses on how librarians are perceived as opposed to how they perceive themselves. Hicks (2016) argues that “image is often conflated with identity” (p. 21) which has constrained the discovery of notions of self. These discussions on deprofessionalization and the precarious professional image of the librarian are all factors to consider when examining relationships in the library workplace. Although there are many practicing professionals and paraprofessionals in libraries who are not aware of the history or the discourse surrounding the perceived tensions, it helps to situate this study within the literature surrounding library paraprofessionals and helps in examining how these tensions play out (or do not play out) in the present-day library work environment. The notion of ‘professionalism’ and where library paraprofessionals fit in and amongst professional librarian status, will continue to be discussed in the next section as literature surrounding core values for the library profession is analyzed.

### **Core values and the library paraprofessional**

One commonly agreed upon notion for professionalism is having a set of defining core ethics and values (Abbott, 1998; Foster & McMenemy, 2012; Litwin, 2009). As described earlier, the core values of librarianship, much like those that underpin the philosophy of libraries, have provided consistency in how professional librarian identity is perceived and defined (Widen & Kronqvist-Berg, 2014; Hicks, 2014a). The core values are often the foundation for what defines a library professional (ALA, 2004; Drabinski, 2016; Gorman, 2015).

Libraries are perhaps one of the earliest institutions to arise since humans began to write and record their history (Koehler, 2015). Standards of practice including guiding

principles followed shortly after. Gorman (2015) views ethics as our moral beliefs and actions associated with those beliefs, and values as enduring ideals that help to define what a group believes is right or wrong and which are the foundation for how the group feels, behaves, and performs. For libraries, values are enduring and should stand the test of time in guiding what libraries represent; intellectual freedom is one example.

The defense of librarianship as a profession has largely been tied to the existence of this code of ethics and agreed-upon values and they are meant to guide those in the career of librarianship. Authors such as Gorman (2015) suggest these values are enduring and speak of them only within the context of professional librarianship. The American Library Association provides policy statements for libraries and library workers and publishes core values that are defined for librarians only: the title of the document is *ALA Core Values for Librarianship* (ALA, 2004). An effort to compare library associations' codes of ethics with Gorman's enduring values also described the values in terms of librarianship (Foster & McMenemy, 2012). Taking Gorman's set of eight core values, then comparing it to a list of 36 core values ascribed by national professional librarian associations across the United States, Foster and McMenemy (2012) attempted to determine which values were globally-shared values and still applicable to librarianship in light of political and/or cultural changes since the values were created. They discovered the most enduring values were: service, privacy, equity of access, stewardship, and intellectual freedom. This will provide context for the ensuing discussion in a later chapter as values are discussed as they relate to library paraprofessional work.

It could be argued that there should be no distinction in the ethics and values that guide professional librarians and library paraprofessionals or indeed any library worker.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), for example, provides a code of ethics for librarians *and other* information workers (IFLA, 2016). IFLA is specific in relating the supplied code of ethics to librarianship by stating, “Librarianship is, in its very essence, an ethical activity embodying a value-rich approach to professional work with information” (IFLA, 2016, para 4) and refers to the code as a guide to the conduct of professionals. However, they remain open to including all information workers (presumably paraprofessionals in this group) in deference to international approaches to library work and the definition of librarianship. But exposure to these codes of ethics and values is predominantly for professional librarians through the educational process or professional development opportunities. Library paraprofessionals are largely left out of the conversation with regards to ethical or value-based guidance for their role in information work.

One area of research that appears to offer equal consideration to both librarians and library paraprofessionals is regarding job satisfaction. Library paraprofessionals have been recruited to participate in studies about both job satisfaction as their roles change and to better understand how librarians and library paraprofessionals experience and perceive their contributions at work. The literature surrounding job satisfaction will be discussed next.

### **Job satisfaction.**

A well-known definition of job satisfaction is by psychologist Locke (1976) who refers to it as “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from an appraisal of one’s job or job experiences” (p. 1300). Others in human resources management have provided enlightening definitions including Weiss (2002) who calls it an attitude one has towards their job, or, an “evaluative judgement one makes about one’s job or job



situation” (Weiss, 2002, p. 175). Line and Kinnell (1993) emphasize an emotional element to job satisfaction, that it is the “result from the perception that one’s job fulfills or allows the fulfillment of one’s important job values (p. 1307). Simply put, job satisfaction is related to what people like or do not like about their jobs (Spector, 1997). My study investigates job satisfaction in library paraprofessionals by considering aspects of work identity, notably a sense of belonging, purpose and value at work. Job satisfaction is viewed as a consequence of a strong work identity (Jansen & Roodt, 2015) and in a sense would be “proof” that a strong work identity exists in library paraprofessionals.

It helps to investigate library and information science research with regards to factors that influence job satisfaction of library workers in order to draw comparisons to the current study and the things participants identify as influencing *their* job satisfaction. Overall, job satisfaction is the most frequently studied topic in organizational behaviour research (Spector, 1997) and this appears to be true in library and information sciences literature that focuses on library personnel. Spector identified several common facets that contribute to job satisfaction. They include communication and relationships with coworkers, being appreciated and recognized for good work, the nature of the work itself, pay, and opportunities for personal growth (Spector, 1997). These are facets that appear to be common in library and information science research on job satisfaction, particularly those studies conducted around paraprofessionals.

Much of the library and information science research on job satisfaction focuses on specific library environments, such as studies conducted on academic libraries by Fitch (1990), Kreitz and Ogden (1990), Voelck (1995), or Sewell and Gilbert’s (2015) study on access services staff. Many studies such as these include or focus on support

staff in libraries but are not necessarily exclusive to library paraprofessionals as they are defined in the current study. However, these studies do provide insight into job satisfaction of those staff members who most closely resemble library paraprofessionals; people in subordinate positions and performing similar work to participants in this current study.

Many of these studies' results are similar. Fitch's (1990) study is one of a plethora of studies in the 1980's and 1990's on job satisfaction amongst professional and paraprofessional staff in libraries, possibly in response to an awareness of changing roles and blurring of responsibilities. The results of this study show that pay and opportunity for promotion are areas where attention is needed in order for support staff to experience greater satisfaction. Conducted in the same year as Fitch's study, Kreitz and Odgen (1990) highlight the overlapping of roles as a cause for job dissatisfaction along with the pay inequities that become transparent because of the overlap. On a positive note, the researchers discovered that the biggest measure of job satisfaction amongst librarians and library paraprofessionals was having good relationships with coworkers, being able to help others, and having autonomy, flexibility and variety in their work (Kreitz & Odgen, 1990). Sewell and Gilbert's (2015) survey of access services staff (technical services, typically circulation, reserves, and interlibrary loan work) determined that a relationship with coworkers was one of the most important determinants of satisfaction at work. A few years earlier, Voelck's (1995) study considered ways in which support staff in academic libraries could increase their level of job satisfaction. It was suggested that institutions consider equitable pay and other overt signs of appreciation that would go a long way in increasing job satisfaction. The study concluded that librarians, often in a position of having to defend their own professionalism and value, inadvertently send

negative messages to and about support staff. The suggestion is to increase communications with support staff and include them whenever possible in decision-making, in order to help them feel valued and therefore increase their level of job satisfaction (Voelck, 1995).

More recently Lim (2008) investigated information technology workers in libraries where, similar to previous studies, the major influencers of job satisfaction were salary, a sense of belonging, and job autonomy. While this study was not exclusive to library paraprofessionals, one can draw comparisons to the type of support work these information technology workers do. Salary is also a factor that determines level of job satisfaction. In 2005, a study on the future of human resources in libraries in Canada concluded that library paraprofessionals, overall, were not as satisfied with their salaries as professional librarians; in particular, school library paraprofessionals (8Rs Research Team, 2005). The study suggested that the library administrators, or those in control of salaries, consider the growing responsibilities of the library paraprofessional in the future when determining appropriate salary levels. The 8Rs Research Team (2005) reported eight in ten librarians and paraprofessionals were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with their jobs. What caused the greatest levels of satisfaction were two things: when they were treated with respect by their supervisors or superiors, and when they are allowed the opportunity to grow and learn new skills in their jobs. In the study, 98% of librarians and library technicians reported that being treated with respect by their superiors was important.

These studies on job satisfaction provide this study with context in helping to understand the library paraprofessional’s sense of belonging, purpose and value in the workplace—the factors which influence the strength or salience of work identity. It is

also useful to examine how work identity has been investigated and discussed in other, similar paraprofessional careers.

## **Section D: Other Paraprofessionals and Work Identity**

### **Work identity in other paraprofessional careers.**

There are a number of parallels that can be drawn between paraprofessionals in library environments and other hierarchically-structured work places, notably education, legal, and medical fields. While work identity literature, specifically, is less prevalent, there is substantial research surrounding different aspects of work identity in paraprofessional roles (although not always defined as “work identity”).

Issues surrounding paraprofessionals who work in educational settings are similar to those of library paraprofessionals; notably, issues surrounding role changes, relationships with professionals and challenges associated with independent work. The paraprofessional role in K-12 education environments appears to be flourishing as the paraprofessional assumes a more substantial role in the educational growth of the student. Irvin, Ingram, Huffman, Mason, and Wills (2018), in an American study of paraprofessionals, recognize that the number of paraprofessionals in the classroom is growing suggesting that this category of worker is something that will be seen more and more in the education field. Their study mentions there were only 10,000 paraprofessionals (often referred to as educational assistants or paraeducators) in classrooms and this number has risen to over one million as of the date of their article and expected to continue to rise at a growth rate of 8% until 2026 (Irvin et al., 2018). Their study sought to understand what level of teacher supervision is required with paraprofessionals in classrooms with students with disabilities. The paraprofessional role has changed as well, shifting from instructional assistant to more of an active educational

support role. This article focuses on the practice of supervising the paraprofessional and points to a need for more formalized paraprofessional training, and the importance of the teacher-paraprofessional relationship in the process of training.

In an earlier study, Downing, Ryndak and Clark (2000) recognize necessary additional training for paraeducators because of the independence in which they perform their significant role working with children with disabilities. The support they provide is seen as valuable, but they often are performing duties beyond their level of expertise and are often isolated from support.

Edmond and Hayler's (2013) study acknowledges the need to investigate identity of the lesser-studied group of teacher assistants, where they experience role ambiguity and role conflict with teachers. They are viewed as "not quite teachers" (p. 216) leading to an ambiguous and conflicted identity. The researchers argue for a broader notion of professionalism to be established. This would include broadening the concept of professionalism from teacher professional to "educational professionalism" (Edmond & Hayler, 2013), p. 219), a concept that would include teaching assistants and which creates a notion of what they call "democratic professionalism" (p. 219). In a similar study, role confusion is identified as an issue with teaching assistants because of the increase in numbers of assistants performing more complex duties in the classroom (Trent, 2014). The study refers to the increase in teaching assistant roles in U.S., British, and Australian schools as one of the most "profound educational changes" (Trent, 2014, p. 29) in recent years. The study addresses teacher assistant identity within the context of a subordinate environment and the challenges this brings, such as conflict and uncertainty over roles and responsibilities between teachers and teacher assistants. This study attempts to create or strengthen a teaching assistant unique identity by better

understanding the teaching assistant's experience at work.

The field of nursing struggles heavily with perceptions of what constitutes professional work. Rasmussen, Henderson, Andrew and Conroy (2018) recently conducted a literature review to determine how registered nurses constructed their professional identity. The study considers the individual, their role, and the context in which their role is performed. While this research focuses on the concept of professional and what it means to a registered nurse, the factors in the construction of professional identity are similar to those factors at play in library paraprofessional's work identity. Nurses operate in a similar hierarchical environment; therefore, there may be things that can be learned from their identity construction. Rasmussen et al.'s (2018) study proposes that strong alignment between an individual's personal identity, their role, and expectations of the workplace can create satisfaction and a sense of value and purpose at work. Lack of alignment produces stress, tension and uncertainty (Rasmussen et al., 2018). Extended or more complex roles are actually a positive thing, according to Rasmussen. It can lead to "innovative nursing practice where nurses are satisfied in their work, collaborate widely with colleagues and other health professionals, and have a positive impact on patient outcomes" (Rasmussen et al., 2018, p. 229). Professional development opportunities, mentorship programs, and other ways in which to develop nurses' skills and connection to others is said to increase job satisfaction and therefore strengthen identity. These are ideas that may equally apply to the library paraprofessional's world.

Research has recently started to explore work identity, specifically, in nurses and nursing assistants. In one study, nursing home nurses struggled with work identity because they often felt excluded and separated from the rest of the nursing profession (Thompson, Cook, & Duschinsky, 2018). The findings from this study confirm that

social identity is an important construct of work identity and with the nurses in question, their overall work identity stability was threatened because of an unstable social identity brought about by a sense of exclusion from other nursing professionals. It is also determined that work identity is compromised when the nurses' work activities and professional group identity do not align with role expectations. What the rest of the nursing profession expects and perceives of their capabilities was not in alignment with what they were actually doing on the job; they were performing far more complex work than was recognized. The study determines that these nurses' work activities and their social identity does not align with role expectations, therefore their work identity is compromised. Emphasizing organization-wide values can strengthen identity, which develops a work identity and an organizational group identity that are in sync (Thompson, et al., 2018).

In another work identity study centered on the nursing career, Gray and Lukyanova (2017) examined the work-related identity of nursing assistants. Despite knowing the importance of nursing assistant work, they experienced low recognition and status, and their work was often devalued by other staff, management, patients, and by the public. They believe their work has inherent value and are called to the profession. However, they often experienced mental, emotional and social challenges and would "struggle to find meaning, dignity, and ownership in their work in the presence of managerial control" (p. 112).

Feeling valued is also a theme in Bishop, Squillace, Meagher, Anderson, and Wiener's (2009) work where their findings corroborate with previous studies of nursing assistant job satisfaction. They determined that a sense of being respected and valued by the organization, along with good relations with supervisors, were some of the most

important determinants of satisfaction with work. Fryer, Bellamy, Morgan and Gott (2016) also investigated nursing assistants, called Health Care Assistants in the study, as to their views and experiences when caring for dying residents. They discovered one of the main barriers to performing excellent work was a lack of value from other members of the multidisciplinary team. Often, these health care assistants felt left out of important correspondence regarding care plans for dying patients. The primary cause of this exclusion was the hierarchical structure of the healthcare industry, which seemed to ignore the input of health care assistants in patient care plans (Fryer, et al., 2016).

The legal profession is also a useful comparison to a library work environment in that, like the nursing profession, the structure of the organization is typically hierarchical. Lively (2001) considers the meaning of professional to paralegals, who are often in a subordinate position yet claim status as a professional. However, their definition of professional is less occupational standing, and more to do with moral worth. This study is used as comparison here because it considers how subordinate worker self-worth is determined and how an increase in self-worth affects job satisfaction and moral status. The study determined that paralegals created their own concept of professionalism that allowed them a sense of elevated status that helped them to feel better about their position. However, the indestructible hierarchical structure in the legal industry makes it unlikely that status changes will occur (Lively, 2001).

Some of the work-identity related literature is comparative to library paraprofessional work in that similar occupational skill levels, with similar training and level of responsibility at work, are investigated. Kirpal (2004) uses four different industries across four European countries to determine how employees in intermediate skill-level careers manage change and transition at work. It was discovered that these



employees tended towards individualization over a collective organizational identity. The employees who adapted best to a fluctuating environment were those who were flexible and redefined their work identity as needed. Kirpal (2004) refers to it as an “entrepreneurial work attitude” (p. 218) that maintains a strong work identity through instabilities with employment, changing of companies, and other precarious employment situations. In studying the nursing profession, he found that those nurses who identified with what he called a “classical type of identification”; that is, the traditional optic of what being a nurse represents, were actually more inclined to be open to changes in their identity. They might develop what he referred to as a “classical progressive occupational identity” (Kirpal, 2004, p. 215) where they still identified with their traditional viewpoint on what it meant to a nurse but were also able to recognize opportune career possibilities brought on by progressive and changing work situations. Kirpal (2004) suggests a shift away from specific skill training to a hybrid of both hard and soft skills including communication and teamwork aptitudes.

Kirpal’s study makes a great contribution to work identity literature in recognizing that workplaces are dynamic and evolving. Work identities are also fluid and more attention must be paid to how to maintain a strong work identity in light of increasing demands for flexibility and shifting skill requirements (Kirpal, 2004).

## **Summary**

This chapter has surveyed the literature related to library paraprofessional experiences within the context of historical and contemporary practices in the library environment. Four major sections were presented. The first section introduced the world of the paraprofessional, which included historical and current descriptions of the paraprofessional, public perceptions on library work, librarianship as a gendered

profession, choosing a paraprofessional career and the history and practice around library paraprofessional education. The second section discussed the broader societal context of the library organization, changing roles of the library paraprofessional and recent perspectives on preparatory education as a result of those changing roles. The third section looked at studies on the relationships between librarians and library paraprofessionals; including discussions surrounding deprofessionalization and core values which both impact the dynamics of the relationship. It concluded with a presentation of the literature on job satisfaction, which helps to show how librarians and library paraprofessionals perceive their work. The final section presented work identity literature in other paraprofessional disciplines.

The following chapter will describe the use of case study methodology as an appropriate way in which to illuminate what shapes the work identity of library paraprofessionals. A collective case study approach, or a study of multiple cases can provide a holistic exploration of the world of library paraprofessionals (Merriam, 1998). This literature review has revealed the complexities in the library paraprofessional world, and my obligation, as researcher, is to fully explore the influences of these facets on the library paraprofessional.

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

This chapter begins with an explanation of case study research and how it is an appropriate methodology for this particular study. The role of researchers using a case study methodology will be examined. The chapter will continue with specifics on the research design; in particular, an overview of the research site and participants, the data collection procedures, how the data was analyzed, and ethical considerations.

### **Explanation of methodology**

The case study is an appropriate qualitative methodology in this research, which was to examine the perceptions of work identity for practicing paraprofessionals in school, academic and public libraries. This study asks the question: In what ways are library paraprofessionals' work identities formed? I looked specifically at post-secondary library paraprofessional programs, relationships at work, and roles and responsibilities of library paraprofessionals and how they shape work identity. Through a case study approach, I explored the entirety of the library paraprofessional's world; case study was an effective way to study a phenomenon in its natural context (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). This methodology allows for deep investigation into complex social worlds made up of many variables that all help to illuminate the phenomenon (Merriam, 2014). A collective case study approach investigated the complexity of each particular case, "its people, activities, policies, strengths, problems, or relationships" (Stake, 2006, p. vi). While the individual cases (school, academic, and public libraries) were of interest, the deeper insights were gained when common phenomena across all cases were found.

Stake (1995), Merriam (1998) and Yin (2003) provide the most enduring perspectives and procedures on case study research. Although these three seminal authors all view case study research as a valid and rigorous way to gain insights, they differ in

epistemological perspectives (Yazan, 2015). I most closely identify with Stake whose perspective is constructivist. He states, “the most contemporary qualitative researchers hold that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered” (Stake, 1995, p. 99). What an individual believes to be true is based on what the individual experiences as part of their world, so reality is formed from their interpretations (Stake, 1995).

Constructivism is qualitative in approach; as Stake (1995) describes, qualitative research is “interpretive, experience based, situational, and personalistic” (p. 31). Stake (1995) emphasizes that phenomena (in the case of this study, the phenomenon is work identity) are linked to many contributing factors such as all those things that make up the individual’s world: “historical, political, economic, cultural, social and personal” (p. 31). These factors, as they were described by the participants and in conjunction with findings from the literature, were examined as to how they affect work identity. In this sense, a constructivist approach was appropriate but also necessary to get at a holistic, complete picture of the paraprofessional’s experience. Personal interpretation is the foundation of qualitative research, in particular, social research (Stake, 1995). I am most interested in the individual’s self-conception of their work identity and their sense of belonging, purpose, and value in the workplace. Therefore, a constructivist lens was an appropriate way in which to view this study, and case study methodology is in line with the constructivist paradigm.

The goal of case study research is not to generalize to the wider population, but to fully explore the cases at hand, so the reader may be provided with “good raw material for their own generalizing” (Stake, 1995, p. 102). Merriam (1998) also assumes a constructivist stance, believing “the key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research are based is the view that reality is constructed by individuals

interacting with their social worlds” (p. 6). Yazan’s (2015) examination of approaches to case study methodology identifies that both Merriam and Stake focus on “the way people make sense of their world and their experiences in this world” (p. 137). From an epistemological viewpoint, an individual’s reality is subjective and a product of their own construction; there are multiple interpretations of reality which are all valid pieces of evidence in a qualitative researcher’s study.

### **Defining the Case**

Stake defines a case as a “bounded system” and suggests the researcher should view it as an “object not a process” (Stake, 1995, p. 2). In this study, each type of library (school, academic and public) was a bounded case. These bounded cases served as umbrellas for a series of smaller categories within each type of library (for example, in academic libraries, a smaller category was a community college library). At least one individual was interviewed for each category.

Case study methodology considers the entirety of a bounded system, not only the case itself, but also the greater circle of influence in which it resides. As Merriam (2014) describes, “the case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (p. 50). We could not fully comprehend what shapes perceptions of work identity for library paraprofessionals without considering the many facets that may influence this perception. Case study research provided a holistic view of the event or process the researcher wished to investigate (Meyer, 2001).

Stake (1995) defines a collective case study as one where several cases are studied and together represent a phenomenon. A collective case study approach is recommended when the researcher sets out to investigate a phenomenon and wishes to

discover what is common or salient throughout the cases. While each case held insight and was interesting in and of itself, when analyzed collectively the cases helped to illuminate the world of library paraprofessionals. Case study methodology is useful for applied disciplines (such as education and library sciences) because of how an increased understanding derived from the case study has the potential to influence future practice (Merriam, 2014). Through the lens of social identity theory, this research used a collective case study approach to examine the perceptions of work identity of paraprofessionals in libraries.

### **Role of the Researcher**

According to Stake (1995), “the case researcher plays different roles and has options as to how they will be played” (p. 91). I viewed my roles in this research as teacher, advocate, participant observer, interviewer, biographer, interpreter, and counsellor (Stake, 1995). I came to this research as curriculum coordinator and teacher in a library paraprofessional program. I have been teaching in the program for over 15 years and have taught a majority of the library-specific courses that the students take. The MacEwan University Library and Information Technology program is one of only two such programs in Alberta; the other program resides at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) in Calgary, Alberta. In my teaching role as researcher, I seek to “inform, to sophisticate, to assist the increase of competence and maturity, to socialize and to liberate” (Stake, 1995, p. 91-92). As an advocate, I have a natural empathy and affinity towards library paraprofessionals. I advocate for library paraprofessional education in my academic institution, am a presenter at local, provincial, and national conferences on library paraprofessional issues, and write and research on library paraprofessional roles and education. Stake tells me that in my role as researcher as

advocate, that I am “obligated to indicate how the findings might be extrapolated, how they could be interpreted in various circumstances, and how they accommodate theoretical discourse” (p. 93). My goal in this research was to help others understand the experiences of a library paraprofessional, so that others can advocate for them as well. As participant observer, my role as a researcher is to be involved in the activities of the library paraprofessional. Stake (1995) reminds us that even “observational interpretation of phenomena will be shaped by the mood, the experience, and the intention of the researcher” (p. 95). I acknowledge that I brought my experiences into the role of participant observer.

In my role as researcher as interviewer, participants might have been former students or know me through my involvement in the library field over the course of my career. In this study I needed to help participants see me as a researcher and not a former instructor. This had some challenges when discussing post-secondary educational experiences; if they were a former student, I wanted them to feel comfortable sharing both the good and the bad, not wanting them to feel they could not criticize their experiences. However, I know my pre-existing relationship with some participants contributed to an environment of trust and allowed the interviews to be authentic and open.

Like Stake (1995), I saw my role as researcher as biographer, who “recognizes that life occurs against changing times, that it is beset with problems, that it has patterns and phases, that it has uniqueness, yet holds much in common with the lives around it” (p. 97). In my role as biographer I told the stories of the library paraprofessionals in these libraries, remembering that case study “needs to present people as complex creatures” (p. 97). In my role as researcher as interpreter, I analyzed the data, found new

connections, and am sharing these interpretations as part of this study (Stake, 1995).

While I hope to facilitate new understandings for readers, I also encourage the reader to go beyond my interpretations. Stake (1995) asserts the “role of interpreter, and gatherer of interpretations, is central” (p. 99). In my role as researcher as counsellor, my way of approaching this research was with an ethic of care. This study developed out of my desire to give voice to the experiences of library paraprofessionals. Finally, in my role as researcher, I was myself: a compassionate human, a librarian, a teacher, a curriculum coordinator, an advocate, and someone who is passionate about the experiences of paraprofessionals in libraries.

## **Research Design**

The previous section identifies a collective case study approach as the appropriate methodology for this study and my role as the researcher in the study. The next section presents the details of the research, including the research sites, participants, data collection, and data analysis.

### **Research sites.**

In a collective case study, cases are chosen because those particular cases will “lead to a better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases” (Stake, 2005, p. 446). A case is selected because it is “an instance of some concern, issue, or hypothesis...[or] because it is intrinsically interesting” (Merriam, 1998, p. 28). In this study, three types of library workplaces were the bounded cases: school, academic and public libraries. These cases represent the typical environments in which library paraprofessionals are employed. Within these libraries, I identified research sites in central Alberta that hire library paraprofessionals. Research sites were selected to provide a range of types and sizes



of library workplaces and paraprofessional experiences. As Stake (1995) states, “balance and variety are important. Opportunity to learn is of primary importance” (p. 6).

Merriam (1998) argues “the more cases included in the study, and the greater the variation across cases, the more compelling an interpretation is likely to be” (p. 40). In this study, to include more variation across cases, 12 research sites were selected. Four research sites were selected for each of the three types of libraries in central Alberta. To examine what shapes work identity of library paraprofessionals working in public libraries, I selected a large urban public library (serving a population of 500,000 or more), a medium urban/suburban public library (serving a population of 50,000 or more), a small urban or rural public library (serving a population less than 10,000), and a regional library system. There are seven regional library systems in Alberta, divided geographically and each system serves the libraries and communities within those geographic areas. To examine the factors that shape the work identity of library paraprofessionals working in academic libraries, I selected a degree granting research university library, an undergraduate degree granting university library, a community college library, and a technical institute library. An undergraduate degree university library usually has smaller staff numbers and all divisions of the library (technical and public services) work together in one space, as opposed to a research university library, where staff are focused in either technical or public services. A large research library will have multiple locations and the paraprofessional will work in one discipline (such as health sciences, humanities, or education). To examine what shapes work identity of library paraprofessionals working in school libraries, I selected a large urban school district (serving a population of 500,000 or more), a medium urban/suburban school

district (serving a population of 50,000 or more), a small, urban school district and a rural school district (both serving populations of less than 10,000). For a visual overview of the cases, please refer to Appendix A.

There is no expectation that these libraries provided a representative sample of all libraries. However, by selecting a broad variety of locations, there was the opportunity to learn as much as possible (Stake, 2005). Throughout the selection of the research sites, an emphasis was placed on understanding the experiences that shape paraprofessional work identity in diverse libraries.

Findings were divided into three chapters, one for each bounded case. With multiple case data, there are many ways in which to organize and make sense of the data. Huberman & Miles (1998) make note of a mixed strategies approach, where each individual case is reported, and themes are discovered, then a narrative cross-case analysis is performed, based on the series of themes throughout the cases. A case-oriented analysis, as described by Huberman and Miles (1998) closely examines each individual case, finding patterns that are common to all participants in the case and patterns common across cases, yet remains loyal to findings that are particularistic to each particular case. The Discussions chapter in this study describes both the particularities and commonalities between cases; it would be notably more difficult to discover the unique qualities of each case if findings were together as one large “case”.

### **Participant selection.**

About thirty individuals responded to a request to participate in this study, and from those, twenty-six library paraprofessionals were recruited for the study. Only participants who have worked two or more years as a library paraprofessional and have a library technician diploma from a recognized diploma education program were selected

to participate in this study. Participants needed to have at least two years of experience in libraries. These participants would then be settled into their work and be able to articulate their experiences with some detail and perspective. These twenty-six participants were chosen without knowing if they would share similar or dissimilar characteristics; they may be “similar or dissimilar, [and] redundancy and variety [are all] important” (Stake, 2003, p. 138). These participants were chosen because I believed by understanding each individual participant, or case, it will help in my understanding of the bigger case(s) (Stake, 2003).

Initial contact was made through social media platforms such as the Alberta Association of Library Technicians group and the listserv for library workers across Alberta (JEROME-L). In these messages, I provided a summary of the research study, the criteria for the selection of participants, my contact information, and further details about the expectations for participation. Potential participants were asked to contact me by email or phone for further information. Approximately thirty qualified individuals responded to the request, and twenty-six were chosen for the study. I chose to ensure a representative sample across my cases and only rejected those where I already had enough participants, or who did not qualify (for example, had only recently graduated). Once selected, participants were sent a letter of introduction to join the study; the letter explained the nature of the study, their rights as a potential participant in regard to privacy, confidentiality, consent, and withdrawal, and the time commitment required by them as a participant. Only those participants who provide informed consent were selected to participate. Please see Appendix B for the letter of introduction and Appendix C for the letter of informed consent.

### **Data collection.**

Most of the data for this study came from semi-structured interviews with paraprofessionals in each of the three types of libraries. Each interview with the library paraprofessionals was audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. I traveled to meet all of the participants in the cities and towns in which they work. There were two exceptions in which I interviewed the participant via Skype. In some cases, I visited the participant at their workplace; in other instances, we met in a neutral location such as a coffee shop and in two cases, at their home. This was the choice of the participant based on time and convenience. Additional data came from job descriptions and in some cases, a follow-up email requesting clarification or further information.

### ***Interviews.***

Interviews provide researchers with access to the “lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Interviews are often classified as either structured or unstructured, with a wide range of questioning styles and techniques falling somewhere in the middle (Schwandt, 2007). Regardless of the type of interview used in qualitative research, for it to be effective, it is essential for the researcher to create an environment that enables a participant to “recall significant experiences, analyze them, and reflect on their meaning” (Ellis, 2006, p. 113).

The kind of environment is established, in part, through the development of trust between researcher and participant. Trust begins to form with the invitation to participate in the interview. This invitation to conversation must be genuine and authentic so that the interview,

becomes a joint reflection on a phenomenon, a deepening of experience for both interviewer and participant. It becomes a conversational relation between two

people, one in which they come to learn as much about each other as they learn about whatever is the topic of conversation. (Weber, 1986, pp. 65-66)

When an interview is conducted in a way that creates an environment of trust and genuine interest, it can be a “powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues” (Seidman, 2006, p. 14).

Full disclosure on the purpose of the study was given prior to the participants’ commitment. Care was taken to establish trust with the participants at the beginning of the research process by ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. The interviews with the twenty-six participants were semi structured and conversational in nature (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Ellis, 2006; Fontana & Frey, 1998). I worked from a list of questions to ask each participant, although the order of these questions varied from interview to interview. The interview questions used for the participants of this study can be found in Appendix D.

Participants were interviewed either at their place of work or a neutral location, such as a coffee shop. The interview location was entirely the participants’ choice based on convenience and comfort level. The participants were interviewed using a digital recording device and that digital was subsequently transcribed. The interview questions were arranged in four clusters. First, I asked some factual questions about the participant in order to get to know them and something about their history at work and in postsecondary education. Then I asked questions related to their experience in postsecondary education; notably, the library technician diploma program. They were then asked about their roles and responsibilities as a library technician in their current work, and finally, questions related to their relationships with people at work. Most of the

interviews went according to plan, although during the course of conversation, sometimes information outside the questions was voluntarily provided by the participant, or questions were answered in a different order. In the end, I was confident that I had obtained all the information I needed in order to know about their experiences as a library paraprofessional. All interviews were between fifty-six minutes and one hour and five minutes in length. No participants withdrew from the study and all expressed that they were comfortable with how the interview went. I had follow-up emails with a few of the participants to clarify comments they had made, and in one case, a participant emailed to share further thoughts after the interview.

### **Analysis of data.**

In qualitative research, the researcher's goal is not only to organize the data, but "to try and identify and gain analytic insight into the dimensions and dynamics of the phenomenon being studied...the process is inductive, grounded in the collected data" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 81). Data analysis involves "making sense of, interpreting, and theorizing data" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 6). By working recursively through the many pieces of data, the researcher comes to a deeper understanding of the whole. This process of data collection, analysis, interpretation, and the subsequent write-up is mediated by the researcher who is informed by his or her own experiences, biases, and background knowledge.

Data collection for this study included: interviews with library paraprofessionals in 12 libraries in central Alberta and examination of at least one job description per type of library (for example, one community college library job description, one large, urban public library job description, etc.) in order to help me in fully understand the work they do. The job descriptions also assisted in creating the sample job descriptions and daily

work schedules in chapters 5, 6 and 7. This data was analyzed to identify themes and patterns within each case and then across cases using a method described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), who define analysis as “consisting of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification” (p. 10).

Data reduction is “the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcription” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 10). Data reduction began in an anticipatory way as soon as the research questions were decided upon and continued through the data collection. It consisted of “writing summaries, coding, teasing out themes, making clusters, making partitions, [and] writing memos” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 10) and continued until the final report was written. In this study, I began my data analysis by reading through the transcripts several times, highlighting interesting passages, and starting to write down common themes, or themes that stood out.

Miles et al. (2014) identify data display as the second part of qualitative data analysis. Data display is “an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 11). Display helps the researcher understand what is going on and can take many forms, including diagrams, flow charts, webs, summaries, graphs, and synopses. All of these visual displays help to “reduce complex information into selective and simplified gestalts or easily understood configurations” (Miles, et al., 2014, p. 11). I used NVivo computer software for data analysis. The interview transcripts were uploaded into the software. Themes identified previously when going over the print copies of the interview transcripts, along with new themes, were created in NVivo and passages of transcription text were added that

connected to those themes. This was worked and reworked many times before I finally settled on a set of common themes in three broad categories: personal and post-secondary experiences, roles and responsibilities, and relationships at work.

The final stage of data analysis, according to Miles et al. (2014) is conclusion drawing and verification. From the beginning of data collection, “the qualitative analyst is beginning to decide what things mean...is noting regularities, patterns, explanations, possible configurations, causal flows, and propositions” (Miles, et al., 2014, p. 11). Conclusion drawing was only part of this final stage of data analysis because verification must also be completed as the analysis progresses. There are 13 tactics “aimed at ensuring the basic quality of the data, then moving to those that check findings by examining exceptions to early patterns, and conclude with tactics that take a skeptical, demanding approach to emerging explanations” (Miles, et al., 2014, p. 294). A skeptical approach involves looking at the data critically, not making assumptions about causal relationships between factors, and creating a “logical chain of evidence” (Miles, et al., 2014, p. 290) based on all the pieces of evidence linked together.

I first went through each interview transcript and highlighted themes, or what appeared to be significant comments, adding these to broad themes in NVivo (for example, the theme of ‘helping people’ became immediately apparent). At first, I arranged the themes by the research sub-questions, but soon realized that certain themes presented themselves across the entire interview. At the end of the process while analyzing the cases and themes as a whole, I then paid attention to the research questions and at that point brought the themes that helped to illuminate answers to these questions, together. The research questions served to organize and deepen an understanding of the findings (Stake, 2006). I spent time analyzing the data using NVivo working and



reworking the themes, and then went back to the original transcripts to ensure nothing new stood out, and to find any additional evidence to the themes that might have been missed. More subtle themes began to emerge through these multiple go-arounds. For example, “helping people” was also narrowed to “teaching and learning”, still a part of working with people, but unique in its own right and as discovered later, unique to academic library participants. After writing the Findings chapter, I went back to the transcripts and NVivo themes again to draw out any more examples and to double check my quotations and analysis were as accurate as possible. Themes were distilled into broader themed categories that made it easier to connect them with the research questions as well as analyze within the broad concepts surrounding work identity. For example, the individual themes of Books, Reading, and Love of Libraries were distilled into one category as they all connected to the sub-question of post-secondary experiences (and what draws one to this career); as well, they all connect to the work identity concepts of personal influences and characteristics that impact the construction of work identity.

It was at the point of writing the Findings chapter that I realized the individual voices of the participants were weakened by creating one, large chapter, reporting on the themes. What was particular, or unique, from each of the three broad cases (School, Academic, and Public) was no longer visible. I then separated the findings into three separate chapters, one for each case, and began to see the unique themes (as well as shared themes) in the cases.

### **Trustworthiness**

A constructivist researcher is not concerned with validity, reliability, or generalizability in the same way as a researcher approaching it with a positivist paradigm. But the researcher must employ deliberate strategies to ensure rigour and be able to claim

the study is trustworthy. The quantitative measures of internal and external validity are replaced, in qualitative research, with trustworthiness in case study research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Trustworthiness of the results of this study can be achieved by paying attention to four factors: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility can be achieved by “prolonged engagement and persistent observation” (Houghton, et al., 2013, p. 13). In this study, rigour was achieved through a detailed, intimate exploration of each individual case, then by performing a cross-case analysis (Cronin, 2014). I identified similarities or differences among the cases and found that repeated themes emerged. A repetitive and iterative process of data analysis helped these themes to become salient, adding to the trustworthiness of the interpretation. When patterns developed, and when no new data was brought into the analysis, I was confident that saturation has been reached.

In qualitative research, trustworthiness can be achieved if the results are dependable and confirmable. In fact, it is the researcher’s ethical obligation to “minimize misrepresentation and misunderstanding” (Stake, 1995, p. 109). The more stable the data, the more dependable the results (Houghton et al., 2013). Confirmability and accuracy of the data was achieved through an audit trail (Houghton, et al., 2013). An audit trail outlines for the reader how the researcher’s interpretation has been reached. In this study, notes were taken, and various versions of the discovered themes were saved in NVivo to ensure the trail of methodological decisions is traceable.

Transferability is possible where particular findings can be transferred to other similar situations, without losing the unique inferences of the individual findings (Houghton, et al., 2013). The researcher must provide enough evidence, or thick

description, of the cases in order for one to transfer the findings to other contexts (Houghton, et al, 2013). In this study, transferability is sought by providing enough, information, a “rich and vigorous presentation of the findings” (Houghton, et al., 2013, p. 16) so that transferability is possible. In a multi-case study approach such as this study, there is a “cross-case analysis with some emphasis on the binding concept or idea” (Stake, 2006, p. 8). The discussion and implications articulate these binding concepts as a result of a rigorous and detailed analysis of the data.

I cannot deny my involvement as researcher as instrument. Throughout the data collection and analysis procedure, a self-reflective stance was taken where I continually asked myself, ‘Do I trust these results enough to act on them? Are the results dependable? Have I been interpretively rigorous?’ The qualitative researcher seeks authenticity in the conclusions as well. Authenticity can be achieved through perceived fairness (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), meaning all participants and voices have been fairly and equitably treated and considered. A strong audit trail provided evidence that voices have not been marginalized or silenced deliberately. Raw data was kept (the interview transcripts), which includes reflexive notes and thoughts in margins. The audit trail also consists of copies of each stage of the theme development in NVivo that was saved so the progression of theme categorization is transparent.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

I selected purposive sampling of paraprofessionals in libraries, as I intended to seek what is common rather than what is particular about each case. The study was delimited by location: central Alberta. The participants were required to have graduated from a two-year library technician diploma from a Canadian institution and be working in a library for at least two years. I also sought a balance to participants working in

different library environments within the scope of school, academic, and public libraries. As it happened, I only needed to turn away participants who did not qualify (for example, who had just graduated) or where I already had enough participants for that particular case (for example, I had an email from an additional regional library system paraprofessional, but I already had three qualified participants). I only had two male paraprofessionals who responded to the study request and both qualified. In a perfect situation I may have wanted more of a balance between male and female participants, as their perspectives might have provided further insight into any gendered issues, but I was loyal to my initial strategy: to accept the first twenty-six participants who qualified. Many library paraprofessionals have attended the library program in which I instruct; so consequently, I had an existing relationship with a few of my interviewees but with the majority, I had no established relationship. This resulted in a different dynamic in the interview, but I was pleasantly surprised when even those I had not met before opened up willingly and eagerly shared stories. In short, all of the interviews with participants were extremely pleasant, congenial, and from my perspective, all the participants openly and willingly expressed their feelings.

The interviews took place in a narrow geographical area (central Alberta) and there were many who studied and received their diploma from the same two institutions in Alberta. Therefore, the results of the research may reflect one particular geographic area only. Studying within a limited geographic area was a deliberate decision. In order to research the number of individual cases that I selected, time and travel considerations had to be made. An additional limitation as a result of the geographical restriction is the fact that library paraprofessionals programs vary between institutions, so there may be different discoveries if the interviews were to take place in other geographical locations,

such as in another part of the province or elsewhere in the country. I was also limited by my own ability and expertise to collect data. My skills as an interviewer and interpreter were framed through my own contextual experiences and my novice experience as a researcher. I understood there were limits to my ability to collect and analyse data.

I reviewed library and information science literature related to the library paraprofessional: the historic context, education, roles, relationships, and work identity of this group. For the literature review I included not only paraprofessionals in library workplaces but also those in other disciplines where paraprofessional experiences or perceptions of work identity were explored. There were further insights gained from studying the complexities and challenges of paraprofessional work in other, similar disciplines such as education, nursing, and law.

Case study methodology has been critiqued on its limitations in generalizing from a single case (Flyvbjerg, 2011). However, because the case study method is highly descriptive and there is depth to the analysis process, there is much to be learned from the individual case that can apply to similar situations.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study followed the ethical regulations for the use of human participants in research as laid out by the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (2014) and the University of Alberta. Details for how participants were recruited was outlined earlier. Consent was free and voluntary, and the participant was free to opt out up to thirty days after the interview. No participants opted out from this study. The invitation to join the study explained the nature of the study, their rights as a potential participant regarding privacy, confidentiality, and withdrawal, and the time commitment required by them as a participant (see Appendix B). They were able to

remove certain parts from the transcript after the interview, if they did not feel comfortable having it included, although no one did.

The interviews themselves took place face-to-face, with two interviewees via Skype, during late summer and early fall of 2017 at a time that was convenient for the participant. The informed consent letter (Appendix C) was reviewed and signed by both the participant and the researcher before the start of the interview. When the interviews took place over Skype, the letter was emailed to the participant prior to the scheduled time and signed prior to the interview. Upon meeting with the participant, I verbally reviewed the letter with the participant, and informed consent was orally received and recorded at the beginning of the interview process. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that focused on participants' experiences that shape their work as a paraprofessional in the library and lasted no more than one hour and five minutes. Each interview was digitally audio-recorded and transcribed after the interviews. Participants' real names and any other identifying information, such as place of work, were removed from the transcript. These files will be kept on the researcher's password-protected computer and in a secured and private location.

## **Summary**

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework in which this study was conducted and detailed the specific methods that were used in order to investigate the formation of work identity of the library paraprofessional. Justifications are given on why a collective case study approach was appropriate for this research, stating that while each case was of individual interest, collectively the cases helped to illuminate the world of the paraprofessionals. A constructivist philosophy in the tradition of Stake (1995) is appropriate and compatible with social identity theory, which places emphasis on the

individual's self-conception as a group member. As researcher, my role as teacher, advocate, participant observer, interviewer, biographer, interpreter, and counsellor (Stake, 1995) is emphasized because in this qualitative research study, I was the primary research instrument of data collection, meaning the interpretation of results was my own construction, and I played an important role in how this research was interpreted and disseminated. The remainder of the chapter outlined specific methods, such as the research sites, participants, and approaches to data collection and analysis. I also outlined how this study approached trustworthiness, by examining these components: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. Ethical considerations completed this chapter on methodology. In utilizing this methodology and particular methods, a rich, detailed description and analysis of the experiences of the library paraprofessional was the goal in this qualitative research study.

The next three chapters will provide the findings from interviews with school, academic and public library paraprofessionals. They will each be organized into three sections: first, a background to the specific library environment as it exists in Alberta is discussed. This profile of this type of library is supplemented by a typical job description for a library paraprofessional in that environment, followed by a snapshot of a typical workday; both are presented as appendices. Then a profile of each of the participants who were interviewed is provided. Finally, in each chapter, the findings are presented for the library paraprofessionals organized by the themes that were identified during the data analysis. This same pattern of presentations is used for all three Findings chapters.

## **Chapter Five: Findings – School Libraries**

This chapter will provide the findings from interviews with school library paraprofessionals. It is organized into three sections: first, a background to the school library environment as it exists in Alberta will be presented. Next, a profile of each of the seven participants from school libraries who were interviewed is provided. Finally, the findings are presented for school library paraprofessionals, organized by key themes. For a visual overview of the cases, please refer to Appendix A. In order for the reader of this study to better understand and visualize the work that school library paraprofessionals typically undertake, I have created a typical job description and daily schedule for a school library paraprofessional in Alberta. This can be found in Appendix E. For a quick reference guide to each of the participants, please refer to Appendix H.

### **Research Context: The School Library**

It is understood in the library profession that “school library” encompasses Kindergarten to Grade Twelve environments. School libraries in Canada have been in crisis mode since at least the early 2000’s. Haycock’s (2003) report brought to light the decline of the school library in Canada which included elimination of teacher-librarians, severely reduced funding, and a growing perception that the school library was an artefact no longer relevant to education and learning (Haycock, 2003). Ten years after Haycock’s report, the Royal Society of Canada (2014) reported on the further decline of school libraries despite evidence connecting school libraries with higher literacy rates and other benefits.

In the midst of this dire outlook, the “learning commons” became a way to reinvigorate the library as the centre of learning in the school and regarded as an investment in the future of school libraries (Canadian School Libraries, 2018).



The concept of learning commons is a philosophical shift but is also a practical change in how school libraries are viewed and structured. Learning commons is defined as an “inclusive, flexible, learner-centered, physical or virtual space” (Alberta Education, 2018, para 1) that focuses on participatory learning. The concept of learning commons changed the philosophy of school libraries so that it becomes a part of, and the centre for, learning and teaching in the school (Canadian School Libraries, 2018). Physically, the space in many schools has changed by reconfiguring the library to an open space, accessible to anyone and without walls. This is not always the case, but the idea being promoted is that the library is an “open learning area with access to technology” (Canadian School Libraries, 2018, para. 8) where collaboration is emphasized and expected. Alberta Education was the first provincial ministry of education to adopt a policy for a learning commons approach; however, the policy does not include recommendations for additional funds for staffing or collections (Hare, 2015). The idea of a learning commons is now a familiar concept in schools and amongst paraprofessionals working in school libraries.

There is no record of the precise number of paraprofessionals working in school libraries in Alberta, but a 2009 survey reported that out of 1778 K-12 schools, 35% have a library technician (a paraprofessional) or clerk responsible for library service, and 90% of all schools do *not* have a teacher-librarian assigned (Sykes, 2010). That means approximately 620 library paraprofessionals are working in Alberta schools in some capacity at the time of the 2009 study. It is unknown how much that number has changed in almost a decade since the survey data were collected. This background is useful to help contextualize the participants’ experiences; particularly, the reconceptualization of

school libraries to a learning commons and the reality of being a sole staff member without the benefit of working alongside a teacher-librarian or other dedicated library staff.

For the purposes of discovering how work identity is shaped in school library paraprofessionals, seven participants were interviewed from four different school district sizes across south-central Alberta. Two participants were drawn from large, urban school districts (serving a population of 500,000 or more), three participants from medium-sized urban/suburban school districts (serving a population of 50,000 or more), and two participants, one from a small, urban school district and one from a rural school district (serving a population of less than 10,000). These seven participants were representative of where library paraprofessionals are typically employed in school library settings in Alberta.

### **School library participants**

What follows is a brief introduction to each of the school library participants who were interviewed. Their length of immersion in a paraprofessional career is divided into early, mid, and late career. In the findings, I use *Early* to represent less than eight years working in libraries, *Mid* is up to nineteen years in libraries, and *Late* is twenty years or more. This section serves as an introduction to each participant who works in an academic library in Alberta.

#### **Alicia.**

Alicia is in a medium-sized urban school district. She works in a middle school (grades 6-9) with approximately 700 students. She previously worked for a non-profit and in the service industry, then as an educational assistant in a school where she became interested in working in the school library. She also holds an undergraduate degree.

Alicia loves her work and describes herself as having “the best job in the building.”

**Anna.**

Anna works in a medium-sized urban school district and graduated over thirty years ago. For the past fifteen years, she has been at a high school with just under 1000 students. She first worked as a teacher after receiving her undergraduate degree but quickly switched to the library diploma program and has worked in school libraries since. Anna says about her work, “I know I made a difference, and there’s not many jobs you can say that about.”

**Brenda.**

Brenda has worked for over twenty years in libraries. She currently has worked for three year at a medium-sized urban high school where there are over 1500 students. She has also worked in a special library and other small school district libraries. She has one additional year post-secondary education but considers this her first and only career choice. Her job title includes ‘coordinator’ in the title. Brenda says about her work, “any small positive impact I can have on the lives of these students is a win.”

**Jacqueline.**

Jacqueline has worked for over nineteen years exclusively in smaller urban school district libraries. She is currently employed as a library technician in a junior high school with over 600 children. She has no other post-secondary education and entered the diploma program directly from high school. Jacqueline, during a job interview for a school library told them, “if you’re looking for quiet, I’m not your person.”

**Linda.**

Linda was a paraprofessional in another industry prior to becoming a library technician. She graduated from the library program twenty years ago and first worked in an academic library. For the past four years, she has worked in a small, rural school with fewer than 125 students that also houses the local public library. She describes herself first and foremost as a “communicator and a collaborator.”

**Paula.**

Paula works in a large, urban school district. She has worked over thirty-five years largely in school libraries but has also worked in a corporate library. Working in libraries has been her only focus since graduating from a library diploma program many years ago. She took a year of university before realizing she was better suited to the library technician program. She says, “I love that you make an impact” when referring to her work in school libraries.

**Veronica.**

Veronica has worked for a large, urban school district since graduation six years ago. She is in a high school with a population of over 1500 students. Her previous work experience is in childcare and in retail. She is classified in the job grid for library technicians in the district, which gives her greater job security. She loves being in a space where “kids feel that they can actually come in and talk, whether it’s about library or school or home, whatever they want they can talk to me and I won’t judge.”

**Findings**

This study seeks to understand the ways in which library paraprofessionals’ work identities are formed. It is shaped by the following sub-questions: How do post-secondary programs that educate students to be library paraprofessionals shape their

work identity, how do relationships within a work context shape work identity in library paraprofessionals, and how do the roles and responsibilities of library paraprofessionals help to shape their work identity? The following is a presentation of the findings from interviews with seven school library paraprofessionals. The same interview questions were asked of all participants, with slight variations according to the conversation and relevancy of certain questions to the participant's environment. Each interview was grouped in three clusters of questions: first, questions about their post-secondary experience and what drew them to a paraprofessional career choice; second, questions about their roles and responsibilities at work; and third, questions about relationships in their work life. Through these interviews and the subsequent analysis of the interview transcripts, themes were discovered that resonated throughout all types of library environments, but with some more salient than others in particular types of libraries.

The most salient themes for school library paraprofessionals were: Books, reading and libraries; Helping people; The right fit; Collaborative and connected; Disconnected; Misconceptions; Voice and agency; Deeper meaning; and Salary. Each of these nine themes will be explored and illustrated with quotes from participants to establish a clear picture of the experiences that shape a library paraprofessional's work identity.

### **Books, reading, and libraries.**

School library participants talked extensively about their love of books, reading and history with libraries as causal factors for what drew them to library work. Several participants who work in school libraries talked about books and reading as a primary motivator for choosing a library career. For example, Veronica described her love of books and helping people by stating,

I've always loved books, I've loved helping people with books, I love just being in a library environment, and I figured I'd try it and it was kind of a perfect fit for me, because I love the customer service aspect, and just get to be around books all day.

Veronica hadn't even considered a career in libraries until a friend suggested it, and she realized she was interested and it seemed the right fit, given her love for books.

A passion for libraries, reading and books was a driving force behind many of the participants' decisions to complete a library paraprofessional diploma. Paula connected her early love of libraries and books to her decision to work as a library paraprofessional. She described her youth spent in a library: "I was always a library helper going through school ... grade four I remember my librarian asked me to put the fiction books away and I organized them all by colour." Alicia also had an early connection with books and libraries and described herself as "a voracious reader" and realized "in hindsight it really should have been my career much earlier than it was." Anna also wished her connections to books and libraries were made earlier. As she explained, "I'd always loved books and I've really kicked myself for not going straight into it after I stopped teaching, because the library was one of my happy places."

The connection between books, reading, and past library experience was strong for most of these school library paraprofessionals. They described how their personal interest in books and reading led them to pursue a career in libraries. In school libraries, that passion could be used to in order to help others.

### **Helping people.**

For the school library paraprofessionals interviewed in this study, a passion for helping people was another motivator for choosing a career in libraries. They realized

early on, usually before they entered the library program that they needed a job connecting them to people. For many of these participants, library work was viewed as the perfect combination of their personal interests: books, reading but also the desire to help people. As Jacqueline described, "... I do love working with people; I just happen to do it in the library world. But if you take the people out of that equation, I would be miserable." Linda had a similar perspective, describing herself as "very much a people person. Customer service and communication has always been my real first strong sense." Similarly, prior to going into libraries, Veronica worked in a customer service job at Money Mart, which helped her see where her passion lay: "Even at Money Mart I realized the part I love was being at window and helping people. It's definitely the best part of my job." Veronica's previous work experience helped her to see what parts of work she found enjoyable, and combined with her love for reading and books, library work seemed the perfect match.

Another participant, Paula, described how she viewed library work when she entered the library diploma program in the early 1980's:

I liked working with the people. I liked working with the public. For me it was almost being like Nancy Drew. You know, you're being an investigator. You're helping people find answers to questions and it's such a great feeling when you're able to find the answers they're looking for.

Paula described how that love of working with the public has translated into her job as a school library paraprofessional: "I really try and have the personal relationships, you know, that you can get so that people aren't hesitant to me for help".

This connection with people and the desire to assist and form personal relationships helps in understanding what drew these library paraprofessionals to school

libraries and what personal attributes were important in order to be passionate about the work.

### **The right fit.**

Beyond an interest in books, reading and libraries, many of the school library participants described the diploma program as the right fit for their career and lifestyle preferences. Another reason for choosing to pursue a library paraprofessional education and subsequently, a career in school libraries was because it suited the lifestyle they were looking for. They viewed a career as a library paraprofessional as the best guarantee of immediate work. Jacqueline said very bluntly: “I was young at the time; I had the marks to get into university, but I didn't see the point in taking a degree for four years that I didn't want, to not have a job when I was done.” Brenda also made a pragmatic decision to enter the diploma program, stating, “I had bills to pay ... I really wanted to make sure that it's something I can do... to get right out of the gate a job and get working. I wasn't passionate about libraries until later.”

Many of the school library paraprofessionals also wanted a well-rounded career and wanted a schedule suitable to their lifestyle. Most talked about having a job with more predictable hours and in particular for school libraries, summers and holidays off, which suited their family lives. Linda made a career change from working as a paraprofessional in a medical-related clinic to a library paraprofessional because it provided a better work/life balance. When working at a clinic, “some hours were longer than maybe a family could juggle, because my husband worked away quite often, on a daily basis, so he wasn't always around. So that would fit more of our lifestyle that time.”

Participants also talked about not having to take work home as a school library



paraprofessional. Jacqueline compared her library job to a teaching job and noted that “I have loved [my work], I have always loved it and [unlike teachers], when you leave at the end of the day you're done.” Anna also recognized the beauty of a school library position by stating,

You don't take your job home with you at night or the weekends. You get Christmas off. You get Easter off and you get summer holidays. If you're a woman with a family or a man with a family, that means you get all that time off with the family as well.

Some participants had initially considered working in other library environments but knew that school libraries would offer a more balanced life. Alicia pondered, “I could definitely see myself in a public library, but the hours and the summers off in a school library, for right now where I am in my life, that just makes the most sense with kids.” With these particular library paraprofessionals, a school library was simply the best fit that allowed them to focus on their family and home life.

All school library participants were very satisfied about their career choice. The working hours that were conducive to family life, the guarantee of more immediate work from a practical diploma, and the promise that the career would bring more fulfillment than previous dead-end jobs were all reasons to choose a library paraprofessional career, particularly in a school setting. They did not just fall into their job; it was a deliberate choice, and they were all satisfied with their decision.

### **Collaborative and connected.**

All participants spoke of their desire for working in a collaborative and connected environment. The following participant stories of meaningful collaborations help to show with whom the connections were made and what interactions are most valued by

the participants. Participants spoke of connections made during their library diploma education and also recounted stories of meaningful collaborations with teachers and others at their work.

Anna had several experiences to share regarding connections made during her library education. Her class was “a really good mix of people and some of us, to this day, still get together.” She described one student with a family like Anna and many others in the program, who said “if I’ve left my family and I have to do this course I am damn well going to take part in every school activity there is.” This student made sure everyone stayed involved and even studied together, and as a result they were all stronger students. To Anna it was a close-knit group, one she did not have during her undergraduate education at a larger institution; there, she “felt so alone.” At her school where she took her diploma, “Never, ever did I feel like that and never within the library program. You knew that if you had a problem you could ask, and anybody would come to help you.”

Other participants described the lifelong relationships formed during the diploma program. Linda described the best part about the program was the collaborative nature of the program. She recalled, “We had a lot of good people that liked to do project work together.” She described her cohort as “like minded”.

Alicia’s experience was different than the other participants because she was a student of an online program. But the connections she made during workplace visits, with other students geographically close to her, were some of the most meaningful parts of the program. She said, “It was really good just to be able to have that camaraderie. That was really great.” She felt a connection to other students in the program even with the online environment. Most participants viewed their program colleagues as like-minded people and they valued this same connection in their workplace, particularly

since most participants worked alone or with a very small staff. The need to collaborate beyond the library was essential.

They recognized and accepted their work as a solo endeavour, which is often the nature of working in a school library. But that did not detract them from wanting to feel as though they were connected with the rest of the school team. Paula, despite being the only employee of her library, shared the same philosophy with teachers and administrative staff in the school. She stated, “I sort of feel like we're a team. We're in it together and the goal is to help the kids—we all have that same purpose.” She did not view her purpose as different than the school as a whole.

Alicia thought that collaborating with teachers helped her to do her job better. She explained,

We collaborate a lot [with the teachers]. I really like being able to bounce ideas off of people and say, what do you think of this and they'll be like, oh my gosh, you're crazy. Or that's a great idea. What if we combined that with ... I really love working that way.

A strong relationship with teachers, leading to strong support for the library, set Veronica apart from other library paraprofessionals in the high school arena, whom she felt lacked the same level of support. She viewed support for the library from teachers was important for student success. As she explained,

I have a lot of support from the teachers and the principal, and they see the value in the library. A lot of other schools I don't think have that and the library definitely suffers for it and so do the kids, because the library is suffering.

Brenda's job description specifically mentioned collaborating with teachers. Her job was created, she said, to help establish a connection between the library and the teaching

staff. The job description, Brenda explained, is all about “collaborating with the teachers and they wanted somebody that could take their space and turn it into a functioning vibrant learning space.” In fact, Brenda’s job was all about collaboration. She said her role was not to merely “sign out textbooks” but “more of the working with the teachers to bring them down, get them down using the stuff that we have and going into the classrooms, working with the kids just to help them along with their school journey.” Collaboration was a big part of Brenda’s work and what her school administration had envisioned when creating the job description.

Collaborating and connecting with others in the school and in the district at large was important to these participants. A strong collaborative environment helped them to do their job better and made them feel valued and a contributing member of the school team.

### **Disconnected.**

As described in the last section, participants were better at their jobs when they felt connected with others in the school. But they also experienced a sense of being disconnected or even excluded from the rest of the school staff and administration. For example, Paula described being left out of important communications:

[The library staff] doesn’t go to the staff meetings, which I think is an issue because you're missing out. I go in and try and find out what's happening in the school and I'm doing a lot of tracking to find out what's going on in the school.

Oh, Friday's orange day. What's orange day? That kind of thing.

This made Paula feel disconnected from the rest of the school staff. Anna told a lengthy but powerful example of her feelings of disconnect. She told the story hypothetically, but the sense of separation and undervaluing was real.

Say, for example, we have a kid that tries to kill themselves and a certain administration will come to me and she will say, this is what's happened. She says it's really terrible and whatever. She said I know they've got some books outstanding, but she says the family's really fragile right now. Is there any way that you can just waive the fines on that right now ... and I'll say yeah, no problem, we can do that, and then the same thing will happen, but nobody will tell me about it and I'll be sending notices and notices and then I'll get a blistering phone call from the parent. Don't you know what's happened? Haven't you heard? .... Didn't anybody tell you? And it'll be like no, nobody told me, and I'm the one that's made to look like a total asshole, right?

Anna said this sort of miscommunication did not happen very often, but when it did, it reminded her of how much communication could be improved in her school, particularly towards paraprofessional staff.

Jacqueline had a similar story to share about problems with communication between her and the rest of the school staff where she felt overlooked and undervalued:

I had a student show up I don't know, the second week of school and she signs herself in and she goes oh, and I'll be here for every social and health class...and like excuse me, where did this come [from]. So, I fired off an email, and it was like oh yeah, we forgot to tell you, she'll be there ... I'm like could you guys at least give me the illusion of saying yes or no you know?

From this final statement, it demonstrates that to Jacqueline, there was not only a sense of disconnectedness from the rest of the school, but a lack of agency.

Alicia was also a bit frustrated with the lack of communication and direction. She wanted to ask her administration, "How do we fit? How do you see us? What do

you want us to be doing? How should we be supporting teachers? How should we be supporting students?” This was not clear to her and she was restricted in her ability to work effectively.

Sometimes the lack of collaboration was frustrating, because library staff knew they had something valuable to contribute but no one else seemed to care. As Linda lamented, “nobody’s asked me that question, do you want to collaborate in this process? Nobody’s even asked me that question.” She went on to explain that she “is very much a communicator and a collaborator, and if I can be helpful, if I can be more - know more about your process, tell me show me, you know, and share with me.” Linda recognized that in order do her best work, she needed that collaboration to happen. She wanted to be a valued participant in the bigger purpose of the school.

It is unclear the reasons for this gap in communication but there was a strong disconnect from the rest of the school community. In conjunction with this disconnect, participants also were aware a hierarchy existed. Alicia knew her position was affected by the historical, top-down structure of the institution. Her perspective offered no solutions, merely a statement of fact of the way things were:

You’ll find in schools sometimes there’s that disconnect between the teaching staff and the support staff. There’s a bit of a top-down ... it’s not unique to our industry ... you find that in a hospital, with a degree nurse, an RN, an LPN and a personal care, right? ... and it's the same thing here. It's just - I think it's just the nature of a hierarchy like that. Everybody is jockeying for - to make sure that they can hold onto the position that they are, and I don't know if that's right or wrong, but it is kind of the way that it is.

Alicia saw comparisons to other professions where the top-down structure devalued the

work of those on the lower rungs.

This disconnect extended beyond the school into the district. As Brenda explained, the school district did not seem interested in any meaningful connections, which made them even more isolated. Brenda explained,

There's less of a team feel I think in the district libraries ... quite a few have retired, and the new ones have come in and when there's nobody in the district that trains them or does any kind of work with them at all then they feel like they're an island on their own.

Ultimately, it came down to feeling undervalued. Brenda continued, "And working in the district is a little bit frustrating as well just because they don't seem to value their libraries and their learning spaces."

Being excluded from certain conversations or information within the school exacerbated the isolated environment in which the paraprofessionals in this study worked. The paraprofessionals often believed they were disconnected from the rest of the school staff community and sometimes felt undervalued at the district level, where paraprofessionals experienced little support.

### **Misconceptions.**

School library paraprofessionals in this study encountered misconceptions about who they are and what they do as a paraprofessional. Some spoke of how these misconceptions began in the diploma program, with unsuitable candidates being directed towards a library career and misinformed on how complex and people-oriented it was. As Anna recalled,

I was kind of surprised at the number of people that really shouldn't have been there but were there and I think that was due to [the instructor's] good heart,

because they would get approached from various agencies, saying we really need a program that this person can get into, do you think that you can help?

Anna said that most of those students did not survive the program, but it took immersion into the program for them to realize that this was not the career for them. She was frustrated that certain students detracted from the program as “we were always carrying these people and they did not necessarily appreciate it or benefit from it”. Anna said, “After the first semester we lost about a quarter of the students. It’s too hard, not what they were looking for.”

Paula shared a personal story, which demonstrated a common misconception that a library program is good for those who are unable to cope with a busy environment:

I have a stepson who is autistic and is looking for a job and the services that he keeps getting help from, the social services, keep referring him to the library program and it’s like - no. Like come and spend a day with me in the library and you’ll see ... you’re dealing with people. You have to be very social and there’s a lot of noise and you have to multitask. It’s frustrating that people still [think] that.

Paula went on to advise anyone thinking of the library diploma program that “for somebody who’s timid and wanting that safe environment ... yeah, that’s not the place.” She said some chose to pursue this career because they always felt the library was a safe space for them, “then they think that they get to continue that peaceful experience but it’s probably a closer job to social work than, you know, what you might think of as library work.” She explained why:

Any of the positions I’ve had have been, you know, you end up taking on the role of a counsellor, guidance, you know, because people do open up and talk to you



and they're coming exposed. They're looking for information on something very personal.

Several participants had their own misconceptions about what the job entailed, prior to starting this career. For example, Brenda and Alicia, both in schools with relatively large student populations where they independently managed the library and its resources, described the difference between their original perspectives and the true nature of the work. Brenda commented:

A lot of people go in thinking that it's one way and you're just going to be the person behind the desk and I don't even have a desk! You can't be the person behind the desk; you have to be out there a little bit more.

Alicia's reality, now working in a middle school, was different than what she originally expected:

My thoughts about what my job was going to be when I started was I was going to be having the kids in a circle around me and doing my story time and then helping them find their books ... [but then] I took a mat leave position in the library at the high school. So, there's no circle time, there's no carpet, there's no read-alouds.

Alicia realized that there were significant differences in the work depending on what school you worked in and working in an elementary school was vastly different than working in a high school.

Paula described how different a school library was from other, more traditional libraries such as the corporate library in which she used to work:

You're dealing with a variety of issues. You're dealing with children but you're dealing with parents and you're dealing with a faculty, with teachers, with the

admin. Whereas in corporate you don't have all that diversity. You have your clientele, you have your coworkers whereas in the school everybody seems to have an influence. You're stretched further.

The diversity of work in a school library career was what Paula enjoyed.

Jacqueline described how her school library did not fit the mold of a traditional library. During a job interview, she was asked what her library would look and sound like. She said she got the job by describing the library as anything but quiet, which was opposite to what her friends had said, who were also interviewed. She gave a vision for what her library would look like, as different than most would conceive:

There's music going in the background, there's kids everywhere, there might be one playing cards in the corner, there's a kid on the computer, there's some reading ... if all it is, is a quiet place where you're signing books in and out, anyone can do that, right? But that's what a lot of people think it is and then they come into mine and they go ... oh!"

It was Jacqueline's mission to change the misconceptions of what a school library is and what more she can contribute. Brenda completely changed the library image when she started her work in the high school. Prior to her, the library was set up as a quiet space with many restrictions on its use. Brenda wanted to change this stereotypically quiet school library and show what it could be. There were reactions to these changes, she reported, where the students said, "woo-hoo, no rules'. And the teachers were like 'oh, so you don't care if they make a mess'. 'No', I said, 'they have to be responsible, it's still a library but, let's get rid of these gates that say they're thieves before they even walk in the door', so that's the first thing we did." She goes on to say,

And the second thing I did was a student, this little girl came in and asked if she

could please eat her lunch in there. The cafeteria was way too big, way too noisy, she was really scared. And that opened up the door for food. It's like you want to eat your lunch in here, come on in.

Brenda's transformation of the image of the library was a success. She continued,

It just totally relaxed the rules and once the gates went out that was the funniest thing, because both parents and teachers said to me 'well, aren't you worried that the kids will steal a book?' I'm thinking, 'What are they going to do with it, read it?'

Still, she encountered misconceptions of her school library space. She still had teachers who have been there for decades, who she was still trying to "figure out what I can do to make them realize that this is a place for them and for the kids."

These participants were confronted with misconceptions of a school library and a school library paraprofessional. According to the participants, misconceptions began in the diploma program where inappropriate candidates were directed to the program because of an outdated and simplistic image of what library work was. This misconception continued to the workplace where they continually seemed to have to explain what it was like to work in a 21st century school library. These findings on misconceptions demonstrate the constant challenges facing school library paraprofessionals.

### **Voice and agency.**

As explored in the previous themes, participants sometimes felt isolated from the rest of the school staff and also fought misconceptions about their role in the library. Having a voice and agency to design and direct their own work was of utmost importance to these participants, given the lack of consideration they sometimes experienced from

other staff and their district. Most participants knew they had some agency to direct their work, but it was often an uphill battle.

One participant, Veronica, described having great support from her school Principal and that this impacted her perspective on work. Even as an early-career paraprofessional who operated under a teacher-librarian, she had license to do her work with some independence. She was very aware her job afforded some opportunities that others may not have. She saw herself as different than other paraprofessionals in the district “because I have that support”. She went on to say, “I have opportunities to explore different things to work with in the library and bring in different ideas and equipment and to be able to have fun and explore.” Veronica appreciated the fact that it might be rare occurrences to have that much say as young paraprofessional in a school library.

It may also take some time to attain that voice particularly if teachers, for one, are not used to having a trained person in the library. As Brenda stated:

So, this is my third year here and this is the year I really feel I'm finally on board, they're onboard with what I'm trying to do, they get that I'm a resource for them and I'm not there to inhibit their job, I'm there to help their job.

Brenda knew that it would take time to build teachers’ understanding of her purpose in the school since they had been used to a vastly different library environment prior to Brenda’s tenure.

Similarly, Paula knew the key was to promote, and to speak up and let it be known what you need and what you are all about. She said, “no matter what library you've been in you really have to promote the services, promote the value because people don’t seem to have a real understanding of what a library is, what a technician does. You

have to promote yourself.” Paula believed that developing a voice was the responsibility of the paraprofessional; it would not happen on its own.

Even as an early-career paraprofessional, Veronica was very aware of the need to promote oneself in order to gain that voice. She warned, “you really have to promote the library especially if it hasn’t been in the past, you really have to get the teachers on your side. Because if you don’t get them or the principal, you’re hooped.” Veronica said there is only so much you can do without having the teachers and the principal on board supporting the library and your work.

Brenda could only do so much without having a voice. As she described, “And I’m not always listened to. I mean this district is a good example, there’s not - it doesn’t even seem to matter that what I do here cannot be done by one person alone.” Brenda believed paraprofessionals needed to stick together and speak up. She continued:

I think there's a need there for people that can speak up about [school libraries] and be passionate about it because they're falling, they're failing. People aren't being hired as any sort of library background at all. I really feel like there's a spot where I can, you know, speak up.

Brenda knew she had a role to play, as a school library paraprofessional, to promote and stick up for libraries.

These school library paraprofessionals were often left in a position where their ideas were somewhat misconstrued, where they needed to work at being heard, and in which guidance and support was non-existent. But they made it resoundingly clear that having a say in how they do their work and the ability to execute their ideas was of utmost importance.

### **Deeper meaning.**

The participants commented heavily on the deeper meaning their work held. It came up at multiple points in the interview, but largely when talking about the things they looked forward to most after finishing school and what activities and experiences they enjoy the most in their current work. Every one of the school library paraprofessionals had a story to tell that illustrated the meaning behind their work. For example, Alicia's story was about her role as a paraprofessional in developing a reader:

Being in a library is really great work ... you're providing a very valuable service to people and—for us in schools, like, we actually contribute to children's success and you know, I've had wonderful conversations with parents about a book that I recommended for their child. Like, I don't know what you did, but now he's reading till 1 o'clock in the morning and I just can't say thank you enough.

Alicia's perspective was that she offered a valuable service to people, particularly students. Paula also told a story that explained the impact she made on students' lives and the reason she stayed in this career for thirty-five years:

The kids find it a safe place to come to. We had one guy – this is a few years ago. He was terrified. Been at school for kindergarten, grade one. He was terrified to come into school, wouldn't come in the school. So, I'd meet him every day at the door with a puppet and he even became good friends with that puppet. Then I'd take him down to the classroom and the puppet would stay with him and then we got to a point where he could come and see the puppet in the library when he was feeling insecure. And he graduated from our school last year and he's the most confident kid today.

Paula realized that child may not remember, twenty years down the road about the puppet, but for now, she made an impact.

Even an earlier career paraprofessional had a profound story to share. Knowing she made a difference in a child's life was likely to carry Veronica throughout her career:

We had one student, he was very, very quiet and very kept to himself, and he'd come into the library and he wouldn't really talk to anyone, he'd just kind of sit and he wasn't really doing anything ... and we slowly kind of were able to just generally saying hi to him and recommending books, he actually started reading and he read through almost my entire science-fiction section, I was getting a little bit scared there, because I'm like, what the hell what else am I going to offer this kid. And ... I did that, and he started you know, actually talking back when we said hello, and he'd actually enquire and we're able to have a conversation. So, to see him kind of come out of himself a little bit, no not a lot, but even just that little bit is just fantastic to kind of see.

Veronica, who is early in her career, identified creating this safe space as being the most significant contribution she could make to the library and to the lives of students.

Anna similarly described how she created a safe space in the library for all those who felt rejected or misplaced, and this brought great meaning to her work:

I also like that for the kids that are just a little bit outside of normal and maybe they're on a degree of the autism spectrum, maybe they're just socially awkward or for whatever reason, I really like it when they come back to see me and they say you were so awesome to me, you made me feel like I belonged here, and that is really something ... when I hear people complain, especially about [Gay-Straight Alliances] in schools, whatever, I get so upset because they really don't

have any idea of what it feels like.

Anna explained how, if a book is stolen from her library she may get a little upset, but she is not angry at the thief. She explained, “I figure whoever it was that took it needed answers and was too ashamed to come and take it out.” She would like to know who it was however, so they know that she is on their side and won’t judge them. She said, “ if they want to take out a book about transgenderism or alcoholism or meth abuse, because I figure it’s them taking the first step to finding out about themselves and findings out that they are okay, that they’re not a freak, and I just like to be a part of that.” As Anna said, she wanted the library to be seen as a safe place for kids with questions to go.

This is a representation of some of the things that excited these school library paraprofessionals and kept them coming back to work every day. Despite misconceptions, a sense of disconnect and sometimes a lack of voice or agency, these paraprofessionals were confident they are making a difference and had chosen to overlook deficiencies in their situation in order to fulfill a broader purpose. This feeling strengthened their commitment to their work and made them feel a part of a bigger purpose, which all have implications on work identity.

### **Salary.**

All participants had something to say about the low salaries common to a school library paraprofessional. This contributed to financial insecurity, yet the low pay was not enough to dissuade them to look elsewhere. None of the participants expressed interest in changing careers, but they were also not pleased with the discrepancy between compensation and the importance of the work they did.

Alicia saw an inconsistency between the pay for public library paraprofessionals and school library paraprofessionals. She believed there is a wider skill set needed in a



school library that should be reflected in pay comparable to other paraprofessional positions. In a school library, one does all aspects of the work--cataloguing, reference, acquisitions, programming whereas in other libraries, the paraprofessional may only focus on one or two of those areas. She described, "the kind of work that I am doing touches on so many areas, but I feel like we're not compensated." She recognizes that the career is not exactly high paying, but at the same time, "the demands are increasing, and the salary is not." But she recognized the value of having a position where, even if there was a lack of direction or a hierarchy existed, her work was valued: "If I was to go somewhere else where I'm paid more, but you're looked down at..." Alicia had not seen changing jobs as a viable option, so had chosen to stay in school libraries.

The personal meaning and value of the work kept Anna working in libraries for decades. However, she recognized that the pay is a deterrent for many whose life position may not allow them to live on the meagre salary. As she described, "many of [the school library paraprofessionals] are single mothers or single women and I mean, for me, the most I can look forward to for a pension is going to be around the \$1,000 a month." The discrepancy in pay between types of libraries was noticeable. Anna continued, "I'm at the top of my profession right now or top of the pay scale in this district. I make less per hour than a person shelving books in the public library system does." She provided another comparison, "I get paid less than an 18-year-old apprentice who's sweeping floors at the Fort McMurray, a lot less." Both Alicia and Anna were not impressed with the discrepancy in pay.

The participants did not see evidence that the salaries will rise. As Jacqueline said, "I see a lot of lip service to libraries; I don't see a lot of action. They're like oh yeah, that's great, yeah, we have someone in there, we have a budget and [then I am]

standing behind them going, I'm quarter-time and we haven't had a budget in four years."

Budgetary concerns for schools were recognized as the root of the issue. Paula saw her large, urban school district following a trend to hire less qualified staff in libraries in order to save money. She lamented,

We're getting people in the libraries, in the learning commons, that don't have any education. Their expectation of what they do is just signing out books, just circulation, and the job should be more than that. It should be a lot more than that. So, the position's going down to the lowest denominator at this point.

Paula was discouraged that budgets were driving the staffing in school libraries, to the detriment of service to students and the library paraprofessional career.

Their low salaries were seen as an insult to the skill and expertise they brought to the job along with the complexities of working with students and the complex service they provided. The trend towards deskilling of library positions worried them. It was not bad enough to have them consider looking to other library environments, but it was something they felt powerless to change. As Paula summarized, "the whole system is wrong".

### **Summary**

These findings help to understand what facets make up the work identity of the school library paraprofessional. School library paraprofessionals are passionate about reading, books, and want to share their passion about libraries with others. They love to work with people and the favourite part of their job is connecting with students and possibly changing a life, however small that change may be. They want to provide a safe space that students can go where they are accepted and where a love of reading may develop. This is what keeps them coming back to work every day. However, they do

face challenges with misconceptions about what they do and what a school library paraprofessional can do, from outsiders, staff, and the school district. These misconceptions build on old stereotypes of what a ‘librarian’ is and the image of a school library.

School library paraprofessionals continually have to fight for agency in the bigger school community. They largely have control over their work but continually need to self-promote. It is not a given that the support is there. The biggest disappointment with their career is the low salary and concern that unqualified staff may replace them, but it is not enough of a deterrent to cause them to switch careers or to a different library environment. Quite simply, they love what they do. There are many layers and complexities to the school library paraprofessionals’ life that have been explored here, and which are all important influences on the development of the paraprofessionals’ work identity. The Discussion and Implications chapters will explore these connections thoroughly.

## **Chapter Six: Findings – Academic Libraries**

This chapter will provide the findings from interviews with academic library paraprofessionals. It will be organized into three sections: first, a background to the academic library environment as it exists in Alberta is discussed. Next, a profile of each of the nine participants from academic libraries who were interviewed is provided. Finally, the findings are presented for academic library paraprofessionals, organized by key themes. For a visual overview of the cases, please refer to Appendix A. In order for the reader of this study to better understand and visualize the work that academic library paraprofessionals typically undertake, I have created a typical job description and daily schedule for the academic library paraprofessional in Alberta. This can be found in Appendix F. For a quick reference guide to each of the participants, please refer to Appendix H.

### **Research Context: The Academic Library**

Academic libraries are defined as libraries “serving the information needs of students and staff of a university or similar institution” (Mortimer, 2007, p. 3) which also includes community colleges, private colleges, and technical institutes. The Alberta Association of Academic Libraries (AAAL) lists thirty-two such institutions in Alberta, ranging in both size and type. These include research institutions, baccalaureate universities, community colleges, polytechnic institutions, and private colleges to name a few (AAAL, 2018).

The size of the library varies depending on the size of the institution. There may be several branches, or subject-specific libraries within an academic institution, such as a Business Library, Science Library, or Law Library, and with separate departments for different functions, such as an acquisitions department for all library branches. Small

institutions will have one physical location for all functions of the library. This impacts the type of work library staff may do; a smaller library may mean the worker is involved in all functions; for example, public service, web development, acquisitions and cataloguing. In a larger institution, the library worker may only be involved in one general function, such as public service, or might only work in the cataloguing department.

Nine participants were interviewed from four different academic library environments in the Province of Alberta: two from a university research institution, three from undergraduate academic institutions, three from technical institutes, and one from a community college. The nine participants work in academic libraries, which are typical for other paraprofessionals employed in academic libraries in Alberta. It is difficult to determine the exact number of library paraprofessionals working in academic libraries in Alberta, but I can make a good estimate. College and Research Libraries (CARL) collects statistics for large, research universities only; the most recently collected statistics show 413 total library staff in the two major research libraries in Alberta (University of Calgary and University of Alberta), with 243 of those staff classified as support staff, although this number includes non-paraprofessional support staff (CARL, 2017). Forty-seven percent of staff, in all CARL libraries across Canada, is classified as support staff that is largely diploma-educated paraprofessionals (CARL, 2017). There are approximately 115 library paraprofessionals in Alberta academic libraries not including the two large, research institutions according to yearly statistics gathered by the Alberta Association of Academic Libraries (AAAL Statistics & Assessment Committee, 2017). Based on these statistics, a rough estimate might be between two hundred and fifty to three hundred library paraprofessionals working in Alberta's academic libraries.

Similar to the chapter on school libraries and in order for the reader of this study to better understand and visualize the work academic library paraprofessionals typically undertake, I have created a typical job description and daily schedule for the academic library paraprofessional in Alberta. This can be found in Appendix F.

### **Academic Library Participants**

What follows is a brief introduction to each of the academic library participants who were interviewed. Their length of immersion in a paraprofessional career is divided into early, mid, and late career. In the findings, I use *Early* to represent less than eight years working in libraries, *Mid* is up to nineteen years in libraries, and *Late* is twenty years or more. This section serves as an introduction to each participant who works in an academic library in Alberta.

#### **Breanna.**

Breanna has worked in a public service position in a university research library for less than three years. She considers this her first career but has experience in retail positions prior to entering the diploma program. Breanna also holds a bachelor's degree. Breanna feels "like I have a pretty dream job. There isn't really a lot of stuff that I do that I don't like ... I guess I'm lucky."

#### **Curtis.**

Curtis has worked as a paraprofessional in a technical institute for just over eight years. He has an undergraduate degree along with the library diploma. He has worked at various positions in a technical institute library and is currently coordinator in a public service position. Prior to entering the library diploma program, he worked as a library page and in other library-related internships and summer positions. The academic library environment suits him because he likes "the serendipity of knowledge falling into your

hands and being surrounded by learners and teachers.”

**Debra.**

A twenty-year library paraprofessional at an undergraduate academic library, Debra also has an applied degree that she obtained while working in an assistant manager role for the library. Library work is her first and only career experience outside of retail positions. She has previous experience as a school library technician but has been at her current library for nearly seventeen years. She said that being a library paraprofessional is “an opportunity to get paid for doing something that I love to do.”

**Elizabeth.**

Elizabeth has three years of experience in libraries. She has previous experience working in a public library, but currently works in a community college library in a public service position. Prior to the library diploma, she obtained a certificate working in the medical industry, and has also worked as an educational assistant and in after school care environments. She would ultimately like to work back at the public library because “the community aspects of libraries, that’s the part of libraries that I liked the most.”

**Heather.**

Heather has worked at a university research library for just over twenty years. She was a cataloguer for the majority of her employment at the university, and in recent years was promoted to work with special collections in a senior technician position. Heather worked in retail and clerical positions prior to starting the diploma program and has an undergraduate degree. Heather says she has “one of the best jobs in the library. I ate my vegetables when I was a kid, and this is my payback.”

**Lisa.**

Lisa graduated close to twenty-five years ago. She considers this her first career, and she has no additional post-secondary education. She is a coordinator in technical

services for a technical institute library in Alberta. She has a lead role with supervisory responsibilities. Lisa says she “loves the knock on the door that says, I need your help ... if I don’t get somebody knocking on my door in a day, that’s a boring day for me.”

**Margaret.**

Margaret has worked at the same undergraduate academic library for over twenty years. Prior to this, she was briefly at a school library and then a community college library for ten years. She is currently working on an undergraduate degree and has additional certification in a library-related industry. She works in a senior role as a library technician. She says about her job, “I think I’m really lucky. I work with pretty good people and at a place that allows us to be ourselves. I have friends who are library techs that don’t have that.”

**Nicole.**

Nicole has eight years of experience in various special and academic libraries since she graduated. She completed two years of an undergraduate program before transferring to the library diploma program. She has been in a public service and web design position as for two years in a technical institute. Previous work experience includes administrative, clerical, and some retail. She feels that “my work is valuable to the institution, and I can see how it’s connected to other departments, and to the institution as a whole.”

**Rachel.**

Rachel has worked at three different undergraduate, academic institutions since graduating less than five years ago. She obtained an undergraduate degree prior to beginning the diploma program. Her previous work experience is in retail and office administration. Experiences from all of her academic positions are reported on in this



study. Rachel said that if she were to talk about her academic library positions, it would be “an hour full of spiel about how much I loved my work.”

## **Findings**

This study seeks to understand the ways in which library paraprofessionals’ work identities are formed. The same process was undertaken as for school library paraprofessionals and the findings. The following is a presentation of the key findings from interviews with nine academic library paraprofessionals. Interview questions were the same as the school library paraprofessionals and asked of all participants, with slight variation according to the conversation and relevancy of certain questions to their environment. The interview was grouped in the same three clusters of questions as the school library participants’ interviews: about their post-secondary experience and what drew them to a paraprofessional career choice, about their roles and responsibilities at work, and on relationships in their work life. Through these interviews and the subsequent analysis, themes were discovered that resonated throughout all type of library environments, but some themes are more salient than others in the different types of libraries.

The most prominent themes for academic library paraprofessionals were: Teaching and learning; The right fit; Collaborative and connected; Divided and inferior; Misconceptions; Voice and agency; and Job security. Each of these seven themes will be explored and brought to life with quotes from participants and will help to establish a clear picture of the experiences that shape the work identity of the library paraprofessional.

### **Teaching and learning.**

Many participants described their passion for teaching and learning as a thing that

led them to choose a library paraprofessional career. The library environment, to them, represented a place where they could continue to learn. Some described an interest in teaching and the teaching atmosphere as something that drew them specifically to academic library work.

A love for learning, however, was common to all participants. This began early on in their lives and influenced their decision to pursue a library career. Curtis, for example, expressed, “I’ve always liked reading. I like learning.” Like Curtis, Breanna also enjoyed a learning atmosphere, which mirrored her own passion for learning. She said, “I loved learning ... it seemed like a dream job to me, getting to go to work and [hear] interesting people and learn new things every day.”

Participants also connected learning specifically to an academic library environment. Rachel’s journey to become a paraprofessional led to a career in academic libraries because she “liked the student atmosphere of postsecondary.” And as Curtis declared, “I like being surrounded by learners and teachers ... I like academic as a cultural subset I guess.” He enjoyed the “serendipity of knowledge” that followed him in an academic setting.

Heather described the campus setting and thought learners brought an environment of “positive energy.” For Heather, the academic library also represented a place for intellectual stimulation. In describing her first academic library position in a cataloguing department she said, “When my daughters were young, and my brain was Jell-O - basically I was working and going home and taking care of people until midnight – some of the only intellectual stimulation involved books coming across my desk.” Heather loved the atmosphere of campus and the stimulation the job offered.

Heather, along with other participants, mentioned teaching as another factor of

their work they enjoyed. Heather's current position means teaching or assisting with the teaching of some classes. She described it as the most enjoyable part of her work. She stated, "I love the classroom work, and we work with undergrads up to graduate students ... one of the things I like the most is we'll have students say that it was one of the highlights in their undergraduate career, when they had courses with us." She was drawn to the student interaction that comes with teaching, saying she "liked the student atmosphere of postsecondary and I liked being able to teach students ... it was more the teaching aspect that I enjoyed and the postsecondary environment that attracted me to the academic library."

Lisa also enjoyed student interaction and described it as the most enjoyable part of her work. She found a passion for teaching library diploma students both as an occasional guest speaker, and in a supervisory role to summer or evening students who worked in the library. She described what she liked:

Making all the pieces connect. People understand parts, but they don't get how it all connects and for a student to succeed in that ... that's why it's important ... I love having the technicians as summer or evening students, because they're so willing to learn.

In much the same way, Margaret described the personal satisfaction she derived from working with students. The activity she found most memorable with her job was "when a student succeeds. When they come back after you've helped them." She described the impact she knew she had made on the student:

And sometimes we get these students referred to us because they totally flunked the paper, or they plagiarized, or they've just done so poorly and then they get referred. So, they're really unhappy that they have to come to us. And we spend

the time with them and then they come back with an A or a B.

Margaret continued, “And then seeing them graduate four years later as successful, awesome young adults and they’re going to be okay, that is the best part.” There was satisfaction in knowing she was part of the development of a learner and contributed to their success in life.

Many of the participants to work in an academic setting because of their affinity for teaching and learning and a commitment to helping students succeed. They liked being able to make a difference in the lives of students through their interaction and assistance. The participants’ passion for working in academic libraries is explored further in this study, but this particular theme helps to show the factors that brought them to academic library work and shape how they perceive their work.

### **The right fit.**

Beyond an interest in teaching and learning, many of the academic library participants described the diploma program as the right fit for their career and lifestyle preferences. They believed a paraprofessional career would allow them to do practical work, which they unanimously described as important to them. Most participants made comparisons between taking a master’s degree or a library diploma. Participants in other library environments sometimes discussed the choice between the two, but it was more commonly discussed with academic library participants.

Of the three cases—school, academic, and public—in this study, academic library participants had the most educational training at a postsecondary level. Four of the nine participants had an undergraduate degree when they began the library technician diploma program, so a master’s degree would have been an option for some. Eight of the nine participants, at the time of the interviews, had some form of postsecondary education with six having a completed degree credential. However,

despite having other options available because of their existing credentials, the participants chose to pursue a diploma over masters. Participants liked the practicality of work that the diploma afforded to them, and this was the driving force behind their choice. Elizabeth, for example, came to the diploma program with few expectations, as she hadn't done a lot of research into it beforehand. Once she began, she was pleasantly surprised with the job options. She already had a special needs assistant credential so liked that library work was also "hands-on interactive with people."

Rachel considered both a diploma and a master's degree in library sciences after she completed her undergraduate degree, but the practical nature of a paraprofessional education won out:

I could have done a master's, but I was just out of school and I was kind of exhausted from all the theory and I wanted to work practical, nitty gritty stuff. And that's what drew me to the library technician role because you get to interact with people, you get to talk to people, you get to touch the books, you get to shelve the books, you get to catalogue the books. You get to do all this stuff that librarians also do but more down to earth.

Rachel had also considered being a teacher and being a librarian had crossed her mind, but the practicality of the diploma program was what appealed to her.

Similarly, Breanna specifically mentioned the choice between working as a paraprofessional and a librarian. She said, "I wanted those hard skills. I thought that was better for finding jobs when I graduated. And I thought it was a bit more transferable." Debra's story was similar. She stated, "I like to learn for the practical hands-on, and that what the technician program was for me, whereas the university experience was a lot of theory and my brain just didn't go there. Just teach me what I

need to know and let me get to it.”

Curtis’s route to a diploma wasn’t quite as direct. He bounced around between postsecondary degree programs both before and after completing the library diploma program. His goal was not a master’s degree; as he stated, “I wasn’t even necessarily thinking that I want to ladder up to be a librarian”. However, after completing an undergraduate degree he said, “I didn’t really have a purpose for it, I didn’t know what I’d do with it, I didn’t really have a distinct area of interest.” He liked that the diploma gave him an immediate purpose and focus, and he landed a paraprofessional position as soon as he graduated.

An undergraduate degree credential was part of most participants’ background and all participants expressed satisfaction with the choice to also pursue a diploma education and to be working in a practical job. To the participants, the fact that this career was practical did not mean it was not complex or challenging. This is explored further in the following theme.

### **Collaborative and connected.**

Participants felt good about their choice to pursue a library paraprofessional career. The congenial relationship with coworkers was a factor that contributed to their career satisfaction. They strongly believed that collaborating and connecting with others at work was important. All the participants from academic libraries had meaningful connections with those they worked with.

They expressed how those connections began with their diploma program cohort. Debra described the best part of the library program was “having that time to be with that cohort and really developing relationships ... many of those I am still in contact with now. And that doesn’t happen in a lot of other programs. There is just something

about that program that just really brings that unity together.” That unity was shared with more recent graduates, such as Rachel who declared the best part of the diploma program was “my classmates, I like these people, they’re a lot like me.” Breanna also felt a deep connection with her library program cohorts:

It was nice that I finally felt that I fit in somewhere, because I had always been introverted and shy, and it’s like the people were all like me. It felt like I had finally found my place ... it was through a lifetime of feeling like I wasn’t quite in the right place. It finally felt like, ‘Oh, these are my people’.

The best part of the diploma program, to Breanna, were the connections made with other students. It really helped solidify that this was the right career choice. This confidence transferred into the workplace where she also enjoyed a collaborative atmosphere. As Breanna expressed,

We all complement each other, and we just get along really well. And everybody always picks up everybody’s slack. If somebody’s just having a bad day and needs to not be on the desk, that’s fine. Somebody else will take it. It’s amazing to be on such a team like that.

Breanna described how she and a co-worker work together as a team to create displays. They each had their strengths in contributing, and Breanna felt their “dynamic is amazing. We always have these overlapping skills.”

Many of the participants described their coworkers as a team and that they were with people who approached work in the same way. As Heather shared, “There are like-minded individuals that I’m working with right now too, and I find that really exciting.” The participants did not differentiate between professional library staff and paraprofessionals; the team included everyone. Margaret worked in a smaller academic

library where everyone - librarians, paraprofessionals, and clerks, worked both physically together in one space and also shared some job responsibilities. This was to the benefit of the library as a whole. She stated, "I believe we're a good team and we work together well, where one is weaker, the other is stronger." Curtis worked in a larger library but where library workers were all in one physical location. He credited the close setting as more conducive to greater collaboration between all workers. He said, "I think part of that's the fact of being a relatively small tight knit group." As Curtis described, there still exists "hierarchies and roles and responsibilities and such" but generally, the working relationships between everyone were good.

Elizabeth also worked in a similar sized academic library where librarians and paraprofessionals worked closely together. She was comfortable in her role to "support the librarians or the people in more senior roles ... I feel like I support other staff members in what they do." Like others, she saw herself and her coworkers as a team, each with unique contributions that benefitted each other. She said, "I don't ever feel like I'm in a lesser role or anything like that from them."

Although she is in a supervisory role, Debra had similar views. She described collaboration and partnership as important to the functioning of the entire library. Although she is trained as a paraprofessional, she was in a supervisory role so had a slightly different perspective than some of the paraprofessionals in this study. She recognized that her role isn't to be "best friends with everybody, because when push comes to shove and you have to make a difficult decision or have that difficult conversation, you don't want it to affect friendships." Yet she believed a collaborative environment between hierarchies was possible. She described, "we have a really good team, so whoever was supervising, we'd always worked more as a partnership rather



than as a supervisor.” There was a balance between collaboration, friendship, and supervision that she had mastered, and which worked to the benefit of her library environment.

Academic library paraprofessionals in this study seemed to be strongly connected to coworkers, including librarians, in part because of shared interests and philosophies. As Rachel expressed, “any librarian I ever dealt with was very friendly, they were just people who love libraries and because I love libraries we got along.” They had the same interests and philosophy of service, which created a strong professional connection. As Lisa similarly expressed, “A lot of my coworkers are much like myself; they want to make sure that our client gets what they need.”

Many participants were certain that having strong social connections with coworkers was integral to a positive experience at work. Rachel talked about the social encounters with those she worked with:

They're just great people ... we'd be able to talk about our days and see how each other were from one week to the next, small talks, that kind of thing. Pot lucks were involved especially if they were a nice tight knit group ... just knowing great people that have similar passions to me it's just kind of heartwarming, so working with those people is wonderful.

Having that personal connection was important to Rachel as it reinforced those shared interests and philosophies. Breanna also connected socially with coworkers and emphasized the strong team atmosphere. She said, “Oh, they’re just wonderful people. I love them all. We’re all such good friends. And we are a really good team. Probably one of the best teams that I’ve ever worked on, and I’ve had a lot of jobs.”

Being collaborative and staying connected were important factors in the

participants' education and their subsequent work environments. In both large and small academic library environments participants in this study often referred to their work group as a team. They also emphasized the social connections that helped to contribute to a team atmosphere.

### **Divided and inferior.**

At some point during their career, either early on or in their current roles, participants sensed a divide in the workplace and inferior to their professional colleagues. Certain responsibilities and opportunities were not accessible to academic library paraprofessionals. Some of the participants, in their current roles or previous positions, perceived a limitation to their roles.

Heather, in her over twenty years of paraprofessional experience, encountered both positive and negative experiences. She explained:

Most of the librarians that I work with are wonderful, and they get the para part of paraprofessional, that you're working alongside them, and not underneath them. Some individuals have been difficult to work with ... I've sort of talked before about some of the librarians I've worked with who, you know, it doesn't matter what you do, you know, you're just the tech.

She described her earliest paraprofessional experience shortly after graduating where she felt restricted by managers and how they viewed the paraprofessional. She recalled, "I've had managers who assumed from the get-go I wasn't capable of doing the things that I'm capable of, and I was bored, because there was stuff that I could do, and I would ask for stuff to do and they wouldn't give it to me." Heather had a good situation in her current role, but she had seen examples of the limitations for paraprofessionals. She explained, "it's right in the structure of the organization – like a hard ceiling. The

structure says there's only so far you're going to go without an MLS, which is fine most days, but it's frustrating." She provided this example to demonstrate:

I work in a cube, which is a nice little cube, but it's not big enough. There's an empty office next to me and I can't have it. But I was offered the office space as storage for my book trucks! You have to go through burning hoops to get [paraprofessionals] an office. And if there isn't the will to get you one, you won't have one.

She does not place the blame on librarians per se, but on long-standing organizational practices. She explained, "It's ingrained in the structure, like the actual physical structure of the building, and it's also ingrained in the hierarchy."

Breanna, as someone who had only been in the career for a few years, enjoyed a great team atmosphere most of the time at her large, academic unit, but a sense of limitations occasionally crept in. As she explained, "There are things that I could do, but I'm not allowed because I'm not a librarian." She observed a division between paraprofessionals and librarians at coffee time too. She said, "You'll hear all the librarians chatting and going for coffee, and our offices are right beside theirs. It's like, 'We can hear you.' Because they all file out together. It can be very exclusionary like that." Breanna otherwise felt she was part of a team, but these small moments created a sense that there was a difference, or a division, between paraprofessionals and librarians.

Lisa reacted more strongly than other participants when asked what are things that make working as a library paraprofessional challenging or frustrating. She declared that "the biggest one is attitudes, and disrespect. The fact that people come in with an idea of what technicians can do, and not giving them the benefit of the doubt as to what they really can do."

According to Lisa, she was unaware of boundaries to the work during her diploma education. She described the discrepancy between her perceptions at school and the reality of the workplace. At school she said, “I felt empowered to do just about anything we could. Leaving school, the biggest disappointment came in the job, when they say, you can't do that.” Lisa suggested that one of the only ways to change the culture was to eliminate the divisions between paraprofessional staff and professional staff. She argued, “we need to drop divisions, because I think there’s a way that technicians and librarians can work together better if we do that ... those [divisions] need to disintegrate, those need to just dissolve.” The barriers inhibited everyone’s natural desire to work together well. As she stated, “Because people that work in libraries are really good people, and they can work together really well when [those divisions] don’t exist.” She urged administration to “stop pigeonholing and let people express their natural talents and allow them to explore their natural talents and stop putting a layer that says you can't.”

Breanna had the same idea in thinking that eliminating sharp and divisive job classifications would provide more opportunity to utilize the skills of paraprofessionals, while helping to improve relations. She suggested, “It would improve relations between librarians and support staff if you’re thinking about us on the same continuum. That would make it more like as a team effort, that we’re all in it together rather than us versus them.”

While these participants mostly experienced a strong collaborative and connected work environment—which included professional librarians—they also at times believed they were an inferior category of worker because of their paraprofessional status. They also witnessed a clear division between paraprofessionals and professional

librarians in terms of social practices and organizational accommodations that were granted only to professional librarians.

### **Misconceptions.**

Academic library participants specifically chose a library technician diploma program because they wanted a practical career. While taking the program they realized there was more to the career than utilizing hard skills. Many participants discussed the possibilities available to them as library paraprofessionals and explained that there is more than meets the eye to this career.

Nicole did not know a lot about the library technician program beforehand, except that it seemed to combine a lot of her skills and interests. The breadth of career options surprised her. She stated, “The variety of career options was surprising to me, learning that libraries aren’t just school or academic or public, that there is a records management side of it, and specialized libraries and archives.”

Both Debra and Margaret, late-career paraprofessionals, discussed the complexity of the career and that it was both flexible and dynamic. As Debra stated, “It’s not all about the books ... it is far more complex than you would think. Be prepared for things to be rapidly changing.” Margaret emphasized that this career would not remain static: “Learn as much as you can but know that it’s going to change. And then be willing to do anything, try anything.” Also, from the perspective of many years’ experience in industry, Lisa advised to not self-limit because the career could offer far more than one might think. She advised, “Keep your eyes open to what’s possible, but nothing is as restrictive as you are yourself—you’re your own worst enemy that way. And that’s something I saw with a lot of my fellow students; they were very, very self-limiting.” Elizabeth, although early in her career, had similar thoughts. She said,

“Libraries aren’t just one type of job, which I think most people picture. But there are so many different career paths that you can take, and diverse jobs within that.”

Heather had been warned by a manager in the industry about the restrictions to a diploma education. She described a time early in her schooling when, at an interview, she had been told her the diploma was a waste of time. While a student, she applied for a summer position and the interviewer criticized her decision to go the paraprofessional route. The interviewer “spent most of the interview telling me why I should have gone to library school instead of to [the diploma program], and how I was wasting my time and making a big mistake.” Heather explained, “I think what she was trying to tell me was that there was potential that would be wasted—I think that was wrong. I think I’ve been able to do a lot of things as a tech, that I might possibly have not been able to do as a librarian.” Heather, from her twenty years or more perspective was very satisfied with what the career has offered in terms of challenges. She said, “If I look back twenty-five years ago, this is kind of what I hoped for ... it’s worked out very well.”

Academic library participants spoke of the complexities and opportunities of a paraprofessional career particularly in an academic library. They saw the career as challenging, full of possibilities, and more complex than they may have expected when they first considered this as a career choice.

### **Voice and agency.**

Participants emphasized how important it was having a voice at work, but also have agency—meaning to be able to work independently and direct their own day. Their sense of value as a worker, a contributor to the organization, became more evident when their ideas and opinions were taken into consideration.

Nicole appreciated being able to contribute. She liked when she was “treated as

an equal and my opinions are respected and appreciated. I like when there's sort of an equality of ideas, that it doesn't matter whether the idea came from a technician or from a librarian, that both are valuable." A work environment that values opinions from all workers was Nicole's preferred work environment. She was appreciative that she had that in her current job. She said that some paraprofessionals in her workplace had given up trying to contribute, but that she had had positive results from contributing and would continue to do so. She commented, "I still contribute my ideas, and I've gone to the supervisor meetings and explained my case and have been accepted and have had my ideas probably accepted more quickly than I was even ready for."

Others appeared to have the same mindset. Debra, from the perspective of a late-career paraprofessional in a supervisory role said it was in part the responsibility of the paraprofessional to make sure they are heard. She argued, "A lot of it, too, is the opportunity to take your position and really own it and bring in your own skills to it, and if there's a gap somewhere and you have that skill to fill in whatever is needed, you can do that."

Debra was in a supervisory position, so could somewhat guide work processes to make sure other paraprofessionals in her library have agency to direct their work. Heather considered herself fortunate to have a supervisor with similar philosophies. She declared, "I hope she never leaves, because I don't feel like I have limitations on what I'm allowed to do."

Heather, like others, felt valued from having agency to direct her work. She said, "I work with people [that] value my opinion and I value theirs too." This is important, she argued, because paraprofessionals have a unique perspective being on the ground floor with the work and listening to their opinions can only help the organization as a whole.

She provided an analogy with the nursing profession:

My mother was an RN and [a relative] who became a physician in the nineties, and she did a locum and lived with my parents for three months. So, she would go and do her work during the day, and then she'd go over everything with my mom at night. And I remember Mom saying to her that if there was any advice she could offer it was that, if you've got a good nurse, you'd better listen to them.

In libraries, Heather explained, it is the same idea. "You really need to listen to the people who are on the ground and have the experience, because if you don't, you're going to be in trouble." This same viewpoint was expressed by Rachel, who had only been working in libraries for a handful of years, but also saw how listening to the paraprofessional was important as they were the ones on the front lines. She advised, "If they're trying to change something on the back end that might affect the front end they should probably talk to a library technician at the front desk, not necessarily just librarians first."

Having voice and agency, as a library paraprofessional, was viewed as important to these academic library workers as they assumed greater responsibilities at work. As Curtis explained, it is very important that paraprofessionals step up and make their contributions known, because they "are being pulled up more and more to fill those supervisory roles, those management and planning roles." It was very important that paraprofessionals exercised their voice and have the opportunity to take control over their jobs, particularly with these greater responsibilities. Having a voice and agency to direct their work was important in order for these paraprofessionals to feel they were a valued member of the organization.



### **Job security.**

These participants were largely content; they had the ability to direct their own work and were part of a collaborative team. Although they sometimes interpreted their paraprofessional status as being inferior, for the most part, participants believed others valued their work. There was a certain amount of job security as a result.

As Breanna described, “I do feel very valued by my colleagues and boss. The librarians that I work with, the things I do for them, they do appreciate the work that I do. So, I feel secure in that way.” Debra also directly attributed respect to a sense of security: “I think pretty much everything is secure because I know that people respect me, and that’s a mutual thing, they trust me ... there’s a high level of trust and respect.” Similarly, Nicole experienced that sense of respect and value because of her contributions, but also believed her permanent status and a union environment led to security. But first and foremost, she said, “My skills and interests are valued by the people I work with, and so that makes me feel secure.”

There was some recognition that job permanency was not entirely secure, even if they were in a position perceived as valuable. As Heather stated, “I really feel like I am in my dream job, and I just cross my fingers that I will stay that way. I don’t see any reason why it wouldn’t, but we’ll see.” She did not describe what might cause her to have felt insecure about her job. She did acknowledge that her seniority afforded her a great deal of protection. She declared, “for all the trouble that I have with the seniority system, it does offer me some protection.” Like Heather, Lisa has been with her institution for many years yet still has some insecurities.

I’ve always loved working [for this organization]. I’ve always found a place for me there and I’ve always found that I could come home feeling that I’ve

accomplished something. It's just in the recent years that that's changed ... not knowing where they're going, not knowing what they're doing and not knowing if I'll have a job next week."

Lisa, despite her seniority, did not think she had security in her job. She had a bit of distrust of the leadership of the institution and was uncertain about the direction it was going.

Some participants were secure in their jobs because they believed their work was core to the functioning of the library. Both Breanna and Margaret described, in different ways, how the practicalities of their work contributed to job security. Their responsibilities at work created a sense of security. Breanna said, "I feel secure in my position because somebody has to be there to turn on the lights and open the doors." Margaret described a conversation with her Director and another library paraprofessional, where they speculated on mass budget cuts and what would happen to library staff. As Margaret described, the other paraprofessional said to the Director, 'You won't be the last man standing, it'll be Margaret.' The Director argued that no it would be him that was left standing. But the paraprofessional said, 'No, no, you keep the one person who knows how to do everything in the library ... you would be gone first because Margaret and I could run this place.'" Margaret believed that the one who knew how to "turn on the lights and open the doors" was the most valued employee; you cannot function without them.

These academic library paraprofessionals were generally secure in their jobs because they felt their work was valued by colleagues and by the institution. However, they still experienced some trepidation about their job security—even those with permanent positions or had been at their institution for a long time. They never fully

described why they felt this way but alluded to a distrust of management and things outside of their control that could lead to job loss.

## **Summary**

Based on these findings, we can better understand what facets make up the work identity of the academic library paraprofessional. Academic library paraprofessionals are drawn to working in academic libraries because they are lifelong learners and enjoy being in a learning environment that an academic library provides. They appreciate the intellectual stimulation of their work, and also enjoy student interaction and being able to personally have an impact on student success. Most have additional undergraduate education or a completed degree but chose to pursue a diploma education in order to have a career that was both practical and fulfilling. The job may be practical, but it is far from lacking in challenge. They view their academic library career as rewarding, full of possibilities, and more complex than they may have imagined. The academic library paraprofessional greatly appreciates a collaborative working environment where they are treated as a valued member of a team. They also appreciate where there is an authentic, social side to the relationships with others at work. They have also all experienced, at one time or another in their careers, times where they felt inferior in the workplace because of their paraprofessional status. The hierarchical division between professional and paraprofessional staff can sometimes limit the effectiveness of the team as a whole.

In the course of their daily work they appreciate when they have a voice and agency to direct their own work which is when they have the strongest sense that their contributions are valued by others they work with. They have experienced some boundaries placed on what they can and cannot do in their jobs, yet they are capable of doing more than their job description allows them to do. They are secure in their jobs

because they make what they perceive as valuable contributions, that are recognized and appreciated.

They spoke with passion, commitment, and confidence about their role as an academic library paraprofessional. Similar to school library paraprofessionals, there are many layers to the experiences of the academic library paraprofessional which contributes to the identity formation process. These connections will be explored in the Discussions and Implications chapters, but first, the findings from public library participants will be presented.

## **Chapter Seven: Findings – Public Libraries**

This chapter will provide the findings from interviews with public library paraprofessionals. It will be organized into three sections: first, a background to the public library environment as it exists in Alberta will be presented. Next is a typical job description for a public library paraprofessional followed by a snapshot of a typical workday. Then a profile of each of the ten participants from public libraries who were interviewed is provided. Finally, the findings are presented for public library paraprofessionals, organized by key themes. In order for the reader of this study to better understand and visualize the work that public library paraprofessionals typically undertake, I have created a typical job description and daily schedule for a public library paraprofessional in Alberta. This can be found in Appendix G. For a quick reference guide to each of the participants, please refer to Appendix H.

### **Research Context: The Public Library**

The public library is defined as “a library funded by the government that provides services to all sections of the community” (Mortimer, 2007, p. 177). In Alberta, the Public Library Services Branch, as part of the department of Municipal Affairs, is responsible for policy development, legislation, administrative services, planning, and funding for public libraries. They also collect annual statistics on public libraries in Alberta. There is a total of 322 public library service points across Alberta in 351 municipalities, with 90% of those municipalities providing library access through a local public library (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2017). There are no statistics that break down the type of worker in public libraries, but there is a total of 2128 full time equivalent staff (this includes MLIS-credentialed librarians, library technicians, and other staff) in public and regional library systems in Alberta. Of this number, 1977 are in public libraries and

151 in regional library systems (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2017).

Regional library systems are established through provincial legislation to supply joint, collaborative services to geographical regions in Alberta (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2017). There are seven such systems in the province. Regional library systems provide services and support to some of the rural and urban libraries within their region. A regional library system structure ensures that all public libraries, regardless of size, have equal access to services, collections, and funding. Library paraprofessionals are employed in regional library headquarters, typically in technical service (primarily cataloguing) positions.

Ten participants were interviewed from four different public library environments in the Province of Alberta, including regional library systems. Two participants are from large, urban public libraries (serving a population of 500,000 or more) and working in public services roles; three participants are from medium-sized, urban/suburban public libraries (serving a population of 50,000 or more), with one participant working in a public services role and two in technical services positions; two participants are working in public services from small-sized, rural public libraries (serving a population less than 10,000), and three participants are from regional library systems. These ten participants are representative of where library paraprofessionals are typically employed in public library settings.

### **Public Library Participants**

What follows is a brief introduction to each of the public library participants who were interviewed. Their length of immersion in a paraprofessional career is divided into early, mid, and late career. In the findings, I use *Early* to represent less than eight years working in libraries, *Mid* is up to nineteen years in libraries, and *Late* is twenty years or

more. This section serves as an introduction to each participant who works in a public library in Alberta.

**Amber.**

Amber has worked for four years since graduation at a large, urban public library. She obtained an undergraduate degree prior to entering the diploma program and has previous work experience as a summer programmer at a local library. She is currently working on her master's degree. She says good-naturedly, "I like visiting with people - I just have a personality for that kind of thing. I'm able to help people in a nice way."

**Angela.**

Angela has been working for a regional library system for approximately seven years. She holds an additional diploma in communications and considers this her second career, after a time as a writer. She advises new graduates, "Be prepared to do anything because you might not be able to go into the library environment that you want to, which is what happened to me."

**Christy.**

Christy has worked at a rural public library for the past two years. She has previous work experience in libraries and many other clerical and shift work positions prior to entering the diploma program several years ago. Christy has no additional post-secondary education. She is currently working in a temporary position as acting manager but expects it to end shortly. She laughs that before she took the technician program, she thought library work would be "just sit at the desk and do nothing and be nice and relaxed."

**Diana.**

Diana entered a library diploma program directly from high school twenty-five

years ago. She considers this her first and only career, and has worked eighteen years at a medium, urban public library in technical services. Prior to this position, she worked for thirteen years in a school library. Diana says about being a paraprofessional, “It’s an awesome career choice. It doesn’t pay loads of money, but it’s very rewarding.”

**Jason.**

Jason has worked for a medium-sized, urban public library for approximately eight years. This is his second long-term career. He has a diploma and a trades credential. He works in technical services and is currently in an assistant manager position. He says about his work, “Not only am I getting to do a job I love, but I get to do it in a library I grew up with. So, from a soccer point of view, I am playing for the home team.”

**Kendra.**

Kendra has worked at a large, urban public library for the past three years. She has some post-secondary coursework but entered the diploma program after a few years working as a library clerk, nanny, and customer service positions. She says about library work, “I’m really attracted to libraries because of the human element to it ... I love customer service.”

**Megan.**

Megan holds a managerial position in a medium-sized, urban public library. She has been in that position for three years and a total of five years in the same library. She previously worked at another small academic library after graduating from a library diploma program eight years ago. Megan also holds an undergraduate degree. She is sometimes asked if she would take her masters and she says, “It might get me another job, but it wouldn’t change what I am doing now. I’d still have the same job. I’d still



have the same outlook on customer service.”

**Melissa.**

Melissa has worked at a public library in a small town for her entire career of twenty-two years. She is currently an assistant manager and has no additional post-secondary education. Melissa worked as a clerk at the same library while in high school and prior to attending the diploma program. Melissa says, “I’m a people person, so the public library is where I had to go.”

**Michelle.**

Michelle has five years of post-secondary education besides the library diploma program but no additional degree credential. She started working for a regional library system almost immediately out of her library diploma program eight years ago. Michelle had a variety of different retail and clerical positions prior to going back to school. Michelle says about choosing a career, “It doesn’t matter where you’re working. If you don’t have the passion for the job and for the parts of the job that are yours, then you might as well work at Wal-Mart.”

**Susan.**

Susan has worked off and on in libraries throughout her adult life. She graduated from a library paraprofessional program over thirty years ago, worked in libraries but then left it for other work. She updated her education when she returned to working in libraries just under ten years ago. She works at a regional library system. In her job as cataloguer, Susan loves “building a record from scratch. You’ve got nothing but a blank template and then you end up with something. I made that. I know it sounds silly but it’s just a sense of satisfaction.”

## **Findings**

This study seeks to understand the ways in which library paraprofessionals' work identities are formed. The same process was undertaken as for school and academic library paraprofessionals and the findings. The following is a presentation of the key findings from interviews with nine academic library paraprofessionals. Interview questions were the same as the school library paraprofessionals and asked of all ten participants, with slight variation according to the conversation and relevancy of certain questions to their environment. The interview was grouped in the same three clusters of questions as the school and academic library participants' interviews. As mentioned in previous findings introductions, themes were discovered that resonated throughout all type of library environments—school, academic, and public—but some themes are more salient than others in the different types of libraries.

The most prominent themes for public library paraprofessionals were: Books, reading and libraries; Helping people; The right fit; Collaborative and connected; Divided and inferior; Misconceptions; Deeper meaning; and Job security. Each of these eight themes will be explored and brought to life with quotes from participants and will help to establish a clear picture of the experiences that shape the work identity of the public library paraprofessional.

### **Books, reading and libraries.**

Most participants grew up with a love for reading, books, and libraries and described these as valuable, lifelong interests that help them do their work. Many had positive experiences in libraries and with reading while growing up, and these interests motivated them to pursue a career in libraries. The following statements from participants represent these experiences.

In describing her early memory of libraries, Melissa recalled, “In elementary school I hated recess. I would rather be reading a book. I would go in and help Miss Smith in the library.” A common experience for many of the participants was spending time in either the school or public library. Megan also described the time she spent in a library at an early age. She remembered, “I’ve always been a person who used the library. When I was a kid, I lived in a very small town and my aunt was a librarian, and we were there all the time ... it just seemed like something interesting to do.” Susan expressed similar thoughts: “I’ve always loved books. I’ve always been a very avid reader. I think that’s at the heart of it.” She believed a love of reading and interest in books were favourable characteristics for one who wanted to work in libraries. “I can’t imagine somebody picking a library technician career if they’re not even really a reader. I think that if you don’t love books, I don’t think you would even be looking at the field because it’s such a huge part of it.” These public library participants emphasized a strong and long-standing connection between a love of reading and books to library work, because this work spoke to who they are.

Diana was drawn to library work not because of her love of reading as much as an influential connection with a librarian. She described the impact this librarian had on her integration into Canada and the English language. She said, “ I remember being in Canada at 13 years old and being taught English by a librarian and that was my first experience in the library...at 18, I knew that’s what I wanted to pursue.” Diana’s English was not strong at the age of thirteen, and this librarian’s instruction gave her the confidence she needed to communicate in English. Diana’s experience working with a librarian made her comfortable to be in a library setting and it became a career interest as a result.

Others also described a certain comfort level and familiarity with libraries, and which led them to a library career. Jason admitted, “I’ve always loved libraries although, to be honest, I had no clue what it took to work in the library.” This was common to most participants in that there was a certain naivety as to what library work would actually entail. Susan alluded to this by saying, “I don’t want to sound too maudlin or sentimental, but I feel very comfortable in the library world, so it works for me.” Jason, although not fully understanding what working in libraries would involve, knew it was bound to be a better environment than his previous career in the automotive world. As he explained,

I saw a better future for myself. I really didn't like my previous career very much. It was the kind of job where you get up every morning and you go to work because you have to. The thought of working in an environment like libraries--I thought it would be a much better working environment.

Jason knew from his previous interaction with libraries that it might be what he was looking for in terms of a fit between his love of libraries, and a fulfilling career.

Angela had also developed a love for libraries during her previous career as a writer. She spent a lot of time at her local public library branch and loved the atmosphere. As she described, “I would go and research, and sometimes it was just nice to get out of the office, where I tootle over to my local library branch, and I just kind of rediscovered the library.” She started to ponder that a career working in the library might be nice and did some research on the local diploma program. She decided to “give it a whirl” and discovered that a library career was the perfect fit.

Each of these participants described their exposure to libraries prior to entering the diploma program and a lifelong interest in books and reading as factors that led them

to pursue library education. They all spoke of their experiences fondly and considered these interests to be their impetus to pursue a career in libraries.

### **Helping people.**

For these public library participants, a desire to help people was another motivator for choosing a career in libraries. Many of the participants had a background in customer service work and recognized that those skills carried through to a library career. Their past customer service experience made them realize this was something they would get to do working in a library and which, combined with their love of reading and books, made it appealing to them to pursue a career in libraries.

Amber, prior to going through the diploma program, worked as a summer programmer in a public library. During this experience, she realized how much she liked the customer service side of library work and how much she enjoyed working with children. She originally wanted to work in a school library but felt the salary and the opportunities were better in a public library. At the public library, she would be able to do a wide array of customer service and working with people was one of her strengths. As she described, “I like visiting with people, and I just have a personality for that kind of thing.” She laughed and said, “I’m able to help people in a nice way.” For Amber, public library work matched her personal interests and built on her previous experience in customer service.

Similarly, Kendra loved the customer service aspect to public library work because she was able to “have a connection with someone and be able to provide them with what they’re looking for.” She had worked in retail and as a caregiver before entering the diploma program so had a background working in human care capacity. However, in previous positions she lacked a sense of purpose. As she described, she

decided on a career in libraries, in public service, because she was “looking for something that made me feel like I was contributing.” She found that with a customer service role in the public library.

Jason worked in a managerial role in a technical service department and specialized in cataloguing. He recognized that he had a knack for this type of methodical work, but it was the purpose of the work that appealed to him. He called it “remarkably similar to what I did in a previous career in terms of facilitating people, getting the stuff they needed, and being able to find stuff.” He felt his job was larger than ‘just’ cataloguing. It was about being a part of the bigger picture of customer service, accessibility, and making things work on the back end so the front end runs smoothly. As he described, “That’s a big important part of what I do. In fact, it’s all really what I do. There is no point to having a catalogue if people can’t find stuff.” Jason’s desire and ability to help people in a less direct way than those in public services did not make it any less important in his mind.

Megan was in an assistant managerial role but in public services. A large part of her time was spent supervising and dealing with a large customer services department; however, she also had interactions with customers as part of her daily work. To Megan, the most important and enjoyable part of her work was “helping customers to achieve whatever it is they were wanting to achieve.” Her administrative work allowed her to influence the “customer service philosophy” of the library and improve things for the patron. This was how she contributed to excellent customer service and it gave her a sense of purpose to her work.

Melissa, also an assistant manager in public services, enjoyed the customer service aspect of her work over the administrative functions she was responsible for.

She had worked in her current library as a teenager and essentially grown up in the library. Her work as a clerk during high school got her thinking of library work as a long-term career. It was the customer service side of the job that drew her to it the most. She recalled one of her experiences as a young clerk at the library, which solidified her choice to take the diploma program and make this her career: “I can remember working – we had a huge snowstorm, and some of the staff couldn’t make it in and so here I am, 17 years old, running the library by myself because I’m the only one that can make it in.” When she first started as a technician, it was the customer service side of things she enjoyed the most. She said she liked “seeing what people are reading and helping devise programs”. This people connection, which started when she was a teenager at the public library, became the best part of the job. When asked this question, Melissa said, “It’s helping people one-on-one. I absolutely love helping people.”

These participants have all come to realize that helping people, and the customer service side of their work, is one of the most enjoyable things they are able to do. It gives them a sense of purpose and satisfaction in knowing they contribute in this way to public library work.

### **The right fit.**

A career in public libraries was described by many of these participants as a good fit. They described this choice of career as matching their personal interests and as giving them what they valued from work. These nine participants held a variety of positions within public libraries and for the most part, they each had ended up doing the type of work that best suited their personal interests and attributes.

Christy wanted to pursue a library diploma because it would allow for personal growth. She had somewhat fallen into a career in libraries having picked up odd jobs

working as a clerk in a small public library, clerical positions in various other libraries, museum work, and volunteering in a small, private library. Christy had built up significant library experience but had hit a wall, and she needed to pursue more formal education if her career in libraries was going to advance. Clerical positions were the only ones available to her. As she described, “I needed to get the piece of paper. The jobs that I was applying for that were library tech jobs, I was getting turned down. I had experience coming out of my ears, but I did not have that piece of paper.” Christy felt the best option was to get the education and pursue a career in libraries. She knew a library paraprofessional career would be the right fit because she had already experienced what it would be like. She’d “already done all the practical stuff. I just wanted the knowledge end.” For Christy, she had enough experience in public libraries to know it matched her interests and would be a good fit; she just needed the education to advance.

Similarly, Kendra had previous clerical experience in an academic library, but she knew she needed a diploma to advance. Once she started working in libraries she recognized the connection between her interests and values, and a public library career. Although she had experience working in technical services, the right fit was the public service side. As she said, “I’m one of those unique people who went from academic libraries to the public libraries and not the other way around and I’m thrilled by it. I went to the public libraries and I went to my specific branch because of the kind of community needs that were there.” A public library career seemed to match Kendra’s personal interests best.

Participants in technical services work similarly believed that working in a technical role was the right fit for them. Susan worked in a regional library system and



she really enjoyed the hands-on aspect to her work. Although the occasional physical aspect of the work wasn't as appealing ("I don't really enjoy loading books into boxes. I don't think anybody really likes that"), she enjoyed the handling of books and the creation of a record. Susan loved books and couldn't imagine someone enjoying a career in libraries without also enjoying reading and books. So, for her work as a cataloguer, it made sense that it was the right fit because she gets to interact with the physical books on a daily basis. As she described, "building the MARC records in the system, just handling the books every day—that appeals to me."

Working in the cataloguing department appealed to Diana as well. Even during her education, she had "a knack for cataloguing". Her initial reason for becoming a cataloguer was because she is shy. She described that she thought "library work was going to be in the basement somewhere cataloguing," however; she did some public service work in both schools and public libraries prior to her cataloguing job. While she enjoyed those experiences, cataloguing was where she belonged. She explained, "I love looking at those new books ... I love the smell. I love the touch. That's probably the most enjoyable; all the nice stuff that comes through the library and I get first pick." After testing out some public library jobs, Diana could see that technical services offered the best fit.

These four individuals represent how a career in libraries was a deliberate choice to find something that was the right fit for their personal interests, values and allowed for an opportunity for personal growth. These participants deliberately chose public libraries because the environment was the right fit for them for a variety of reasons, including the customer service and technical aspects of their work.

### **Collaborative and connected.**

All of the public library participants expressed wanting a strong collaboration and meaningful connections with their coworkers. They described themselves as part of a team that included all workers, regardless of status and the specific work environment. Several indicated that this collaborative mindset formed in the library diploma program, where they connected with people of like mind. For example, Kendra recalled her experiences at school in this way:

I really enjoyed how it was a specific group of students that spent almost all of their time together. I loved the camaraderie that came out of that as opposed to some of the other kinds of experiences I've had in academia where you don't see the same faces in all of your classes.

Kendra enjoyed being with a group of people that were like-minded and the connections she built with others was important to her. That same camaraderie was found in paraprofessionals who graduated many years earlier. Melissa, who graduated over twenty-five years ago, also described positive connections with other students. She said, "The people in my class were absolutely fabulous. We were such an incredible team." The best part was "the camaraderie between the students. I mean it's a lifelong friendship. There are people who have the same interests and we were there for the same reason." Most participants experienced a connection with their fellow student colleagues.

Angela offered an interesting rationale for what drew everyone together. She described the type of individual who chooses this particular career:

I think it attracts a lot of people that are highly, highly introverted. At the same time, I think it also attracts a lot of people that are highly communicative, are a

little bit more extroverted and I think the connecting factor between these two groups is that we're all, to varied degrees, socially conscious.

Angela saw library people as "her people". She shared a social conscience with others in the library community where everyone wants to "help people, make a difference in some way, shape or form." This, for Angela, is what created a sense of collaboration.

The same desire for collaborating and feeling connected to others carried through to the workplace. Participants were unanimous in describing their relationship with coworkers in a positive way. Whether in a large working environment or in a very select group, they described everyone as part of a team. They did not distinguish between managerial, professional, and paraprofessional staff, viewing everyone as an equal, contributing member.

Michelle worked with a fairly small team of paraprofessionals in the cataloguing department of a regional library system. But she saw the entire regional library office as part of the team, as imperfect as it may be. She said, "At times I think we can all rub each other the wrong way and at times we are the only person for our team, so we get out there and cheer each other on. And many times, that is everybody in the building. So, it's not just the library technicians." Melissa described her entire working cohort as a team as well. She worked as the assistant manager for a small-town public library, a completely different public library environment than Michelle. She described her perspective of the group she worked with:

We've got a very good team dynamic, and able to just throw things out there and not be looked down upon if something doesn't work. I think we all have our very important roles in this team. We're all specific cogs. And if one of those cogs were missing, it would take time to just figure out how to either repair that

or how to change things.

Melissa viewed herself, even in a managerial position, as part of a team where everyone works together for the good of the library. Megan, also an assistant manager, viewed her work team in the same way, where collaborative efforts seemed to bring out the best in everyone. She described how this looked in her department:

I come up with this great idea for something and then we think, what do we do with that now? Do we bring it forward? Do we play around with it a little bit more? So, I enjoy that aspect of it, just being able to talk to each other and figure things out and find new ideas.

Megan appreciated the open, collaborative atmosphere in which she worked. The environment was informal enough that everyone felt they could toss around ideas and make decisions quickly and collaboratively. Kendra described a similar relationship with her public library branch team, attributing a respect for each other as the key to effective collaboration. As she explained,

I'm not trying to say it's all one big kumara circle. It isn't. There's issues and we don't always agree with each other on ideas or sometimes when things come from top down from management. But what I see in my branch is respect for individuals even though the respect for their ideas may not be there.

Kendra further described the connectedness of her group. She enjoyed that “we have a common outlook and compassion for our community. We care about the customers that we have, and we look out for each other and the community members.” Their common customer service perspective made her feel connected to others she shared that philosophy with.

Diana, although in a completely different environment in a cataloguing

department, felt respected and valued for her individual contribution. She liked that she had a say in decisions and that management appeared to value her opinion. She described, “this is probably the first place where I’ve worked, where my work is important. I feel I am important in the big scheme of things; and that my opinion is taken into consideration.”

Taking a genuine interest in each other’s lives and feelings strengthened this connection. To Angela, having personal interactions with co-workers helped to create a positive experience at work and was integral to a positive work culture. She said that was “big for me, that we’re all getting along, and that we’re able to have fun; there’s kind of a lightness in the work environment.” She could not bear the thought of being at work and not being able to laugh and talk with coworkers. She described some people who thought personal connections are unimportant, people who said, “As long as you’re doing the job, it doesn’t matter what they’re like as a person” but to Angela, it totally mattered. She valued that authentic, personal connection.

These authentic connections came easily to Jason, in his work at a medium sized public library. In reference to his library, he said “you find that our library culture tends to lend itself to very open-ended discussions and very open-minded discussions where we can agree to disagree on things.” In contrast to other work environments he has encountered throughout his life the work culture in a library was the most positive. As he described, “For the most part it’s a very enjoyable culture because people do talk to one another and listen to one another, as opposed to some workplace cultures where someone talks, and you listen.” In his library environment, even their CEO “is absolutely the first person to admit when she does something wrong. And I think that’s a great culture to be a part of.” The culture of connectedness in his workplace is

apparent.

These public library participants, in various work environments, valued collaboration and a connected work culture. This connectedness began with their cohorts in the library diploma program and continued to the workplace, where both personal and professional connections helped to strengthen the team dynamic.

### **Divided and inferior.**

Many of the participants, unfortunately, also witnessed a sharp division between professional librarians and paraprofessionals that impacted team dynamics. Some described it as more prominent in the past—early in their careers—but others still felt the divide. In Angela’s experience, this divide was not always readily apparent or obvious, but was more a general feeling. She described, “this is not all librarians by any stretch of the imagination, but that’s just a vibe I’ve felt ever since graduating, is that there is a divide, and I’ve never understood why.”

Susan, like Angela, worked in the cataloguing unit of a regional library system and reported that she sometimes experienced inferior treatment because of her paraprofessional status. She described it as a hierarchy: “Despite having just said how valued I feel by my employer, sometimes I do feel sometimes that the library technicians are kind of bottom of the heap and that can be a bit irksome at times.” Mostly, Susan’s daily work was unaffected by hierarchical attitudes, but she didn’t always feel a part of decision-making in areas that affected her work.

Jason believed his role was valued in technical services at his medium-sized public library, but this wasn’t always the case. He explained, “In a previous incarnation of our library, we were expected to just do whatever the librarian said. And that culture has changed a bit. I think there is a little more respect for what we do now.” He said the

technical services staff made a point to talk to others about the work they do so everyone had an understanding on how technical services contributed to the work of the institution and as a result, their work was better valued. Working relationships were good now in his environment and a sense of inferiority was largely gone.

Michelle was frustrated that professional staff seemed to forget how much she was capable of doing. Often, she would not be asked her opinion or that her knowledge was utilized. Professional librarians she argued “need to remember that we do have a body of knowledge. And we can add to their body of knowledge. We don’t have to be an either/or situation. We don’t have to be us versus them. We just do different work.” Angela worked in an environment similar to Michelle--technical services in a regional library system--and had similar thoughts. It was sometimes a “better than, less than environment” and it made her uncomfortable. She didn’t think library paraprofessionals and librarians were doing vastly different jobs, but that there was a deep-rooted class system that would sometimes threatened the unity at work. Angela spoke broadly about work class divisions, not just in reference to her specific work environment, when she gave this scenario. The problem lay with people’s negative perceptions of educational divisions.

But people have this perception of, ‘I don’t want to go to NAIT to be an apprentice, to be a welder or steam fitter, or a machinist even though I’m going to make epic money, I’m going to have great benefits, I’m going to have a pension. I’m going to be pretty much taken care of for the rest of my life and no, it’s not going to be easy work, but I’m going to be looked down upon, because I just have this two-year diploma or an apprenticeship, or whatever.’ It’s just stupid.

She attributed this attitude to being raised in a working-class family. She said, “I’ve always thought that is crap, especially coming from a middle-class family and my dad was a tradesperson – he was a pipefitter and a welder. My mom worked at Sears, so I came from a very, very blue collar, hardworking family.” Value, to Angela, did not come from credentials; it came from being an honest, hard worker. To her, the divide in the library field created “an unnecessary tension” and she just wanted to be treated “equally and fairly.” Megan, in her supervisory role, said it didn’t matter to her what someone’s academic credentials were. She explained, “As long as you’re doing your job and you’re doing it well, I don’t care if you have no degree at all.” It was all about being an honest, hard worker who contributed, regardless of what that contribution was.

While not all participants experienced a division or inferiority in their current work, the majority—particularly those with several or more years of experience—had experienced it at some point in their careers. Sometimes it was an inexplicable sense of division between professional librarians and paraprofessionals, while others did not sense that their work as a paraprofessional was valued, that it had been overlooked, that no one valued the library paraprofessional diploma. In all cases, they acknowledged that a divide existed or at least was something they were aware of, but they were unified in their desire for an equitable and fair work environment.

### **Misconceptions.**

These public library paraprofessionals believed the career to be more complex than they may have originally expected and expressed this point of view positively. However, they also encountered misconceptions about library work as quiet and centered on books. These misconceptions mask the complexities of this career. Megan, in her work reviewing applicant resumes and performing job interviews with prospective



library assistants, frequently saw this misconception play out. She insisted:

Don't go into this field of work because you like reading books. Go into it because you like people...and if you can't work with people, you can't do this job. That's the biggest one because I see it all the time. People applying for jobs going, 'I love to read, and I love to be in the library'. That's great. Can you have a conversation with someone?

Megan emphasized that this career is more than a love of reading and libraries; it is about working with people. Christy's advice was similar, having had significant experience in libraries prior to taking the diploma program. She offered, "Do your research...if you've never worked in a library before and you think because you read books you would like the [library paraprofessional] program. The book part might be 2% of what we actually do. I would just go out and get the work experience, volunteer, something to see if you would like that job."

Kendra discussed how she has also encountered misconceptions about the work she and other public library workers do:

I find that many people who I know outside of the library world have a preconception that it's a fairly chilled kind of environment. And when they learn about the weird stuff that I've dealt with, everything from irate people, which you get in every kind of job, to pepper spray and dealing with medical emergencies and overdoses and mental health issues and people who just need someone to talk to and all those things that are so much more complicated than putting a book on hold.

These paraprofessionals working in a public service role were aware of how outside perceptions of library work do not match reality. Megan suggested that public perception

might be that daily work is quiet and static when in reality, she said,

You never know when the sewer's going to back up or there's going to be an unaccompanied minor. Or there's going to be a kid riding his bike in the library. Or the fire alarm goes off. Like every day is different. Every day is different. And you just have to be okay with that, because if you're not, it's not the job for you.

Public library work was far from the “chill” environment that people expected, as Kendra had described, and as both Kendra and Megan suggested, anyone interested in this career was advised to consider the realities of the work.

Those participants in technical services also encountered misconceptions of their work, from within the library industry itself. As Jason described,

I think there are people that work in libraries that don't have an idea as to what technical services does. It tends to be a thing of where books get sent to us and books come out, and somewhere in technical services, the technical services elves do their work.

Jason recognized that what goes on in technical services remains a bit of a mystery to the outside library community. Michelle also said, “The managers, the librarians who manage our department, are never quite sure what I do.” The misconception might be that this was boring work, but Jason said when he conducted tours for library workers, they would leave saying, “that's interesting, because now I know how to find things.” These participants frequently encountered misconceptions about library work and specifically, the work involved in public libraries.

The participants also described how some who choose to enter a library diploma program are unaware of what all is available in this career. Jason described it best when

he offered this advice as if speaking to a prospective student: “Don’t get too caught up in just the focus of what you want to do, but look at the big picture and do your best in all of the courses, regardless if it’s something you are interested in or not...sometimes when you try to do something you end up enjoying it more than you realize.” This is exactly what happened to Jason, when he discovered his penchant for cataloguing during schooling. He became the assistant manager of a technical services department even though he entered the library program without any knowledge that there was “a whole crew of people that were in the back of the library”, in technical service roles. He has realized how valuable his skill set is, as a technician. As he described,

I don't mean to put down MLIS students; they tend not to have the same cataloguing background as the library techs. So, when it comes to actually searching things by subject headings they tend not to do that very well. They're great with Google, but when it comes to the actual subjects, because they haven't studied it at all, they can have problems with that.

Jason emphasized the unique skill set held by paraprofessionals and wanted anyone interested in this field to know what complex and challenging work it can be. He also acknowledged that technical services jobs were not as plentiful as in the past, as technological changes render some cataloguing positions obsolete. But he foresaw positive changes by making positions more diverse and less technical services-specific. As he described, “I think that you are going to be seeing hopefully more [cataloguers] out on the floor, interacting with patrons and being library assistants, rather than, you know, technical services people.” This he viewed as a positive change.

Michelle also saw greater possibilities when it came to the future of paraprofessional work in libraries. She advised newcomers to volunteer first, to get a

true sense of the work and the flexibility this career offered. Volunteering will help a prospective applicant to “dream big, but also look at all the opportunities that are available.” She said while at school; do not limit yourself to one type of library work because “the job is not just cataloguing, and not just searching for information, not just doing reference work. And reference work can encompass, as large an area or as small an area as you choose.” Michelle spoke with pride about her work, and the work of a paraprofessional and this strengthened her commitment to the career and solidified her decision to become a library paraprofessional.

Angela knew this to be true from her own experience. She emphasized that one might end up in an area of library work one did not expect. This was her experience. She was focused on customer service but ended up with a permanent full-time job as a cataloguer in a regional system, a job that wouldn’t have been her first choice but which she now enjoyed. She advised, “Be prepared to do anything, because you might not be able to go into the library environment or sector that you want to, which is what happened to me. You might have to be prepared to go a path that you never saw yourself in, like I did, but it's turned out okay.” There were many career opportunities within the library profession and even within the public library, Angela believed. She also saw greater opportunities even within her role in technical services, where she was also working a bit in acquisitions. She felt good about this, even though “it’s just a ton of change right now, but I can see my job description changing.” Michelle also enjoyed the opportunity for expansion of her duties. She said, “I need to find other little things to kind of change it up. So, there are quite a few tasks that I’ve sort of been given and then just sort of assumed.” These participants were glad to see greater responsibilities added to their work.

From a public service perspective, Kendra's advice was to consider the reality of the work, and whether or not you are up for the task. She said, "I really find that I encourage people to consider the emotional labour that they're willing to put into their job and into the communities that they're going to be a part of." The job is far more than meets the eye, when it comes to the public service side of library work.

These participants in public libraries were anxious to share how much more there was to this career than one might think and encouraged anyone thinking of this career to not be limited by their own misconceptions of library work.

### **Deeper meaning.**

The participants also talked about finding deeper meaning to their work. Almost all of the public library paraprofessionals, whether in a public or technical service role, described their work as having purpose beyond the routine. For example, Christy, in describing her work in a small, rural public library said, "I like the [rural library]. It doesn't matter who you are – I'm not going to judge you. You come in and you smell, or you've been drinking--you see it all. And, there's no judgment." Christy valued the authenticity of the work she did—being part of the community, helping the community—without judgment. This brought meaning to her job. Similarly, Melissa worked in a slightly larger urban centre, but still a small-town setting. She also described her work as community-focused and the parts of her work brought meaning to her:

I really do enjoy dealing with the kids. Because we are in a recreation centre we tend to see kids, and particularly the same kids all the time. They know that they can come here. We try to make this a very safe place. The kids can feel comfortable coming and enjoying and knowing that they're safe here.

Melissa enjoyed this part of her work the most—working with kids and creating a safe

space where they could be. She wasn't focused only on providing services but on providing an atmosphere of trust. This brought deeper meaning to the work she did.

Kendra's description of what resonated most with her, in her work, was very similar. Kendra worked in a large, urban library in an inner-city branch, which could be very challenging. She chose this environment on purpose. She was seeking out deeper connections with at risk populations as part of her work. As she explained,

The branch that I worked with has a high population of low-income folk, homeless folk, and people who are marginalized. I wanted to be able to assist people with connecting with resources both inside the library system and to other resources within the community. I went to the public library specifically because of the difficult issues that can sometimes chase other people away from the public libraries.

Kendra compared herself to her friends, who did not have the same sense of purpose she had about her work. According to Kendra, her friends were "struggling with meaning and identity and I never had that once I started working in libraries, because I always felt good about what the overarching theme was." For Kendra, "it was never about meeting the dollar at the end of the day and so I always felt good about that."

Even those working in technical services believed their work held deeper meaning. When they described their work, they talked about how they contributed to the bigger picture; there was more meaning to their work than just cataloguing a book. They contributed to the organization's overall goal of getting information to the customer.

Susan, working in a regional systems office, described it this way:

[Technical services] kind of makes the wheels go 'round. I mean the librarian consultants do a valuable job. I mean everyone's job is valuable. I'm not saying

that, ‘Oh mine is [better]’ but for me I just feel it is kind of at the heart because we’re the ones granting access to the books. It’s very vital.

Susan described her department and specifically the work she does at the very heart and purpose of what they do—provide access to materials. For the most part, cataloguing technicians in regional systems do not have direct contact with customers; that is, patrons of the libraries in which the region serves. However, they sometimes have contact with the staff of those libraries when that staff requires assistance with what materials are available and how materials might be organized. Angela derived her sense of purpose, and deeper meaning, from knowing she helped to provide this critical service. She described the contact with the staff from the regional libraries as one of the most enjoyable parts of her work and enjoyed any and all contact with others. Angela, unlike Susan, had worked in public service for a while prior to the technical service job, and really missed the public part of the work. She described what she liked about helping those staff in the regional libraries:

It’s nice when [the library staff] calls in and they’re like, oh my god, thanks. You know, oh, you’re so helpful. And they appreciate that we’re there, we’re willing to take the time to explain it to them and help them figure it out. So that’s probably the most satisfying part of my job.

Angela found this part of her work very gratifying. As she explained, “it’s a nice feeling—a lot of these people in more rural settings that don’t have the training or the experience, and are always kind of learning on the fly, are in a bit of a pickle and either they don’t understand something, or they just need some guidance with something, or they’ve mucked something up.” She loved that she was able to provide this direct customer service, even within her technical services role.

The participants working in technical services, such as Susan and Angela, found deeper meaning and enjoyment in different ways. Jason, managing a technical services department enjoyed both the technical work itself and the bigger purpose behind the work. He said, “I actually do actually enjoy cataloguing ... you make a record and you just sit there and look at it and go, that's a really good record, you know.” He described it as solving a problem - there was satisfaction in doing that. It wasn't just about creating records, but problem solving. He also viewed his job as large than the work itself. As he stated, “I don't like the idea of just sitting at my desk and doing something. I like to see the big picture. Some [cataloguers] tend to see a very small picture.” Jason did not see himself as a typical cataloguer in that way and having a larger perspective on the significance of the work was what he enjoyed the most.

Michelle is also a cataloguer for a regional system. She talked about how library paraprofessionals approach their work differently particularly in technical service roles. Bottom line, one needed to experience some sense of passion in their work particularly in a fairly methodical, routine job such as cataloguing. As she described,

I know a lot of library technicians who are as intense and passionate as me. And I know library technicians who are laid back and don't care. I know there are some who view it as a pay check and there are some that view it as a calling – which is not quite the way I view it, but pretty close. I mean it's – if you don't have a passion for it, how the heck can you do it all day long.

Both public library paraprofessionals in technical services—like Michelle, Jason, Angela and Susan—and public library paraprofessionals in public service—like Christy, Melissa and Kendra—found deeper meaning to the work they did. Whether that meaning came from their interactions with a customer or contributions to a cataloguing



record, they had all expressed a sense of purpose and found this to be one of the most enjoyable parts of their work.

### **Job security.**

Public library participants in this study all were fairly secure in their jobs; both public and technical services paraprofessionals were confident their jobs were stable. Almost all were in permanent positions, which helped contribute to a sense of secureness. The only participant in a temporary job was Christy, who felt quite uncertain and concerned about finding other work because of the competitive job market. She loved the work she was doing in the rural library, but it was not permanent, and the struggle to find other work made her reconsider her choice to enter this career. As she stated, “I thought I was in my dream job.” She questioned her decision to get a diploma education because it did not provide her with a secure career. She pondered that an MLIS might have provided more career options. As she said, “Now I think I should have been going for my master's, not my library tech.”

Angela also addressed the reality of trying to find work in a public library. She was in a technical service role but previously worked for a large, urban public library system. She said in giving advice to new paraprofessionals, she would say, “know that you're probably not going to get permanent, full-time employment, especially if you want to go the public route.” Angela and Christy both described a lack of job security and few permanent positions for paraprofessionals in public libraries as a challenge for their career advancement.

Amber had similar thoughts but not because she was discouraged about not finding work. Rather, she had reached a ceiling of what she was able to do as a public services library assistant. She said, “I anticipated that I would get to the point where I'm

at where I have reached as far as I'm able to go and that I would have to go back to school.” She had reached the end of the opportunities that were available to library paraprofessionals. While Amber was secure in her work as a public library assistant, she was insecure in knowing this career might not provide long-term satisfaction.

Both Amber and Kendra worked for a large, urban public library organization. They were both unionized so had a sense of security from that. But neither described job security as the reason for staying in their roles. Amber was restless and job security by itself was not enough to sustain her in that role. With Kendra, her job security was derived by her strong relationships with colleagues and a sense of purpose in her work. She explained, “I like my job, I like my community, I like my coworkers, I like my management, I have good relationships with everyone and I don't even feel that I have to work hard at that. I feel like our branch, specifically, works very well together.” She went on to say that she did not have “any kind of job insecurity”. The positive work environment gave Kendra a sense of security and confidence that she had made the right career choice.

Technical service paraprofessionals are conflicted between their own sense of importance in the work they do, and what they hear regarding a bleak future for technical services. Some paraprofessionals like Jason and Diana, described technical services work itself as vulnerable to technological changes. As Jason described, “The thing that makes me insecure is the amount of outsourcing that is going on with my job. I realize it's a business reality and I can see a day coming when there will be three people working in our technical services department. I am hoping to be one of them.” Diana had similar feelings although she feels confident in the value and importance of her work. But she said, “What would make it better would be probably not receiving

threats. I've always heard about cutting hours in our department. Job security is not that secure. Cutting hours and also, maybe, replaced by—I would hear things like we buy records now, why do we need a cataloguer?" She did not think her job was in jeopardy, but the rumours kept circulating that technical services will someday be no longer needed.

However, Diana thought her unique skill set made her both a secured and valued employee. Threats to technical service work did not affect her greatly. As she described, As a cataloguer, there's not a lot of library techs out there who like cataloguing or are very good at it. In this job that I'm currently in, when the application came up there was no one in the building who would qualify for it. Cataloguing is a very unique and special niche in the library.

But Diana was not immune to feeling vulnerable. She considered the impact of technology changes on cataloguing work when she explained this:

With the introduction of automation, my boss had talked about how everything is shelf-ready. You can order shelf-ready books now. So, it would already be here with correct labeling and reference. All you do is attach the barcode to the record. So, that basically cancels out most of my department, right?

Diana warned, "If you are going into library school and if your full intent is just for technical services and nothing else, I think that tech services might just be non-existent."

Jason was not alarmed when he heard threats of downsizing but remained realistic that it could happen. As he explained,

I don't see that we can do away with cataloguers entirely, because we will always be buying stuff from places that will not supply us that. But I can see us being downsized. Myself and my manager have talked about when certain people retire,

do we replace them? Is there the need for that or can one person do it?

While these participants in cataloguing positions were not immediately threatened by this or had a sense their jobs were in jeopardy, they acknowledged that downsizing or the elimination of technical services was a possibility.

These public library paraprofessionals, both in public and technical services, generally felt secure in their jobs. There was some trepidation that, in public service work, there were not enough positions available and a limit to the work that a paraprofessional could do. In technical services, they largely were valued and believed they were secure but knew there was always a risk of downsizing due to the changing nature of technical services work. Job security played a role in how they felt about their work, but largely the participants expressed security and stability in their jobs.

## **Summary**

This chapter presents findings that help to understand what factors influence the work identity of public library paraprofessionals in Alberta. These workers are passionate about reading, books and had positive encounters with libraries growing up. This all influenced their desire to work in libraries. They believed strongly that this career was the right fit whether it be in a public service role, part of technical services, in a small rural library, or a large urban center. They recognize that there is tremendous complexity to their jobs and also a great deal of diverse job opportunities within the public library realm. Those working in a public services role chose that environment specifically because of their desire to work with people and provide excellent customer service. Those working in technical services roles like working closely with books but also like that they are part of a bigger purpose of libraries—to provide information to people—and their work is important in making this happen. Those in administrative

roles had worked their way up to these positions and enjoy both continuing to be involved in customer service and in influencing how customer service operates within their library. They enjoy the challenges of the job, and believe that in their work as a paraprofessional, they have much to offer a library organization.

These public library paraprofessionals value strong collaboration and communication with their co-workers and administration. They view themselves as part of a big team where they share a similar social conscience. They find the workplace culture to be respectful and that their voice is heard. Sometimes they feel divided from and somewhat inferior to professional librarians, and long-standing hierarchies taint the team atmosphere. They would like others, particularly administration and professional librarians, to remember that they have a valuable body of knowledge to bring to the table.

Whether in public or technical services, these paraprofessionals believe their work to hold deeper meaning. Whether that meaning came from their interactions with a customer or creation of a cataloguing record, they believe what they contribute is as valuable as anyone's contribution and this gives them a sense of purpose and pride in their work. Similar to the school and academic library participants, there are also many layers and complexities to the public library paraprofessional's experiences that all factor into the development of their work identity. Next, the Discussions chapter will consider the connection between the findings and the concepts and processes of work identity that will help to enlighten our understanding of the world of the library paraprofessional.

## **Chapter Eight: Discussion**

This chapter connects the themes from the literature with the findings from this study. The study provides evidence that library paraprofessionals have a relatively stable work identity with a positive sense of purpose and belonging at work. However, certain long-standing job hierarchies, historical perceptions of the role of the paraprofessional, and structural workplace limitations inhibit a full realization of their potential. The discussion in this chapter will help to highlight paraprofessional experiences and reveal certain factors that need to be addressed in order to help improve the working conditions and work environment for the library paraprofessional.

The discussion is organized into three sections: Personal Influences, Work Relationships, and Work Activities. Each section is arranged by the study's individual themes and connected themes will be grouped and discussed together in conjunction with the literature. The section will wrap up with discussion that connects the corresponding research sub question to findings as a whole.

To reiterate, this study was framed by the question, 'In what ways are library paraprofessionals' work identities formed?' The three sub-questions that helped to provide focus to the study are (1) How do post-secondary programs that educate students to be library paraprofessionals shape their work identity? (2) How do relationships within a work context shape work identity in library paraprofessionals? (3) How do roles and responsibilities of library paraprofessionals shape their work identity? The findings, discussed here, will help to give insight into these questions and to the experiences of the library paraprofessional.

### **Personal Influences**

*Themes discussed: Books, reading and libraries; Helping people; Teaching and learning;*

*The right fit.*

Work identity is negotiated through and by personal influences, which includes personal interests, personal history, one's value system, and also "those factors that provide meaning to the person in their particular stage of life" (Crafford, Adams, Saayman & Vinkenburg, 2015, p. 61). The themes discovered in this study—Books, reading and libraries, Helping people, Teaching and learning, and The right fit—all describe the personal influences, or intrinsic qualities and values, that brought these participants to this career and helped to shape their work identity.

The findings suggest a connection between personal influences and the construction of work identity in paraprofessionals. Saayman and Crafford (2015), in studying the work identity of manufacturing company employees, listed three things that influence work identity: work activities, working relationships and "the personal side of work identity and the formative events that influence who we become" (p. 1). Participants in this study spoke extensively of those formative events that influenced how they felt about their chosen career and the work they do. In library and information science research, it was discovered that personal, or intrinsic interests such as having a lifelong passion for books and reading, a connection to the nature of the work of libraries, and a desire to work or help people are what primarily influenced the choice of a career in library and information science (Jones, 2010; Masdonati, Fournier, & Lahrizi, 2017, Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, Vassilakaki, & Tsatsaroni, 2015, Rathbun-Grubb & Marshall, 2009; Shannon, 2008; Simon & Taylor, 2011; Walker & Calvert, 2016). These studies were primarily centered on graduate-level library and information science participants, but interestingly there are similar findings from the library paraprofessionals in this current study. Participants from school, academic, and public libraries in this study

noted their personal interest in, and history of, engagement with books, reading, and libraries as factors in choosing a library paraprofessional career. Those in public and school libraries expressed a desire to work with and help people. Academic library paraprofessionals were interested in continuing to learn and be around learners. All participants described the career as a perfect fit to their personal interests, values, or with their particular stage of life. School library participants thought the career fit their need for a particular lifestyle, notably summers off and suitable hours for family life. Public library participants wanted to work in an occupation close to their own values, which included connecting to customer and providing meaningful service to the community. Academic library participants wanted a career that was practical and hands-on, intellectually stimulating, and be involved in teaching and learning. Each of these findings will be explored as to how it connects with previous research.

### **Books, reading and libraries.**

Both school and public library participants expressed a personal interest in reading, books and libraries and connected these interests to a library paraprofessional career. School library participants spoke about having positive library experiences growing up and how they became interested in working in a library as a result. This is similar to the findings in Jones (2010) where an early, positive experience in libraries was one of the factors that drew participants to a career as a school librarian. Shannon's (2008) study of school librarians showed a similar desire to have a career that connected with books in some way.

Public library participants also spoke fondly of early memories in libraries and how a personal interest in reading drew them towards a library career. The findings mirror the collective discoveries from Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, et al.'s (2015)



systematic literature review, where in their research of studies in library and information sciences, the primary motivators for pursuing a career in this field were a love of books and reading, and the nature of the work itself; that is, working in the environment of a library doing library work. While their research focused on graduate-level library and information science education, the motivation to pursue a library paraprofessional education appears to be similar. The findings in this study indicate that intrinsic motivators are similar between those choosing a library paraprofessional career and those choosing graduate level library education.

### **Helping people/Teaching and learning.**

For school and public library participants, one of the main reasons for choosing a library paraprofessional career was because of a desire to help and work with people. Public library participants described the customer service side of work as one of the most enjoyable things they did at work, and for school library participants, the desire to form personal relationships and to assist others was important. Melissa represents many of the participants in saying, “I absolutely love helping people one-on-one”. Similar findings to the public library participants were present in Rathbun-Grubb and Marshall (2009) in their study of public librarians and what motivated them to pursue a career in public libraries. Again, the participants in Rathbun-Grubb and Marshall (2009) were librarians, but their description of what drew them to a career in libraries was very similar to the public library participants’ descriptions in this study. Rathbun-Grubb and Marshall’s (2009) participants were drawn to public library work with the hope of making a difference in people’s lives, also described by the participants in the current study. These findings are similar to Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, et al., (2015) where in their review of the literature they found the primary motivator for entering a graduate-

level program in library and information science is having an interest in helping people.

Similar findings were present with the school library participants and Shannon's (2008) study of school librarians who, in part, chose a career in schools to make a difference in the lives of children, through their passion for reading and libraries. Jacqueline said, "if you take the people out of the equation, I would be miserable". Alicia's story of getting a child to read until one in the morning, and how the parents couldn't thank her enough in getting their child to read describes this passion and deeper meaning behind school library work. However, her connection with libraries started for more pragmatic reasons (good working hours conducive to family life) and because of her early love of reading; the awareness that she was making a difference in the lives of children came later. There is similarity in what draws a library paraprofessional to a career in school libraries and what draws a graduate-level library science student to a career in school libraries. Shannon's (2008) participants also described both pragmatic and intrinsic reasons for choosing a career in school libraries; they appeared to be equally unfamiliar with the landscape of school libraries but wanted to be a part of the education system and connect with children through their literary interests. Participants in the current study expressed similar feelings about being a part of a child's development (Anna, for example, described how she played a part of a youth's discovery of themselves) indicating it is a balance of reasons that draws someone—professional or paraprofessional—to this particular library environment.

"Helping people" can be viewed as performing an act of service. Gorman (2015) describes the mission of librarians is to "serve individuals, and in doing so, to serve society and humanity as a whole" (p. 62). Service, or what might be considered the concept of helping people, is described as a core value in librarianship and is considered

central to a librarian's professional identity (Hicks, 2014a). The American Library Association specifically refers to service within the Core Values of Librarianship (ALA, 2004), seemingly inferring these values are only attributed to professional librarians. The findings from this study suggest this is a prominent foundational philosophy for library paraprofessionals as well. The lack of acknowledgement that library paraprofessionals may share this same core value is concerning. However, there is some recognition that the value is and should be shared; the Canadian study by the Cultural Human Resources Council recognized the need for the development of "personal competencies rather than strictly applied skills" (8Rs Research Team, 2006, p. 108) for paraprofessionals, and argued the library technician curriculum include "public service and communication skills course offerings" (8Rs Research Team, 2006, p. 108). This is at least some recognition that service is an important, fundamental foundation for all library work, regardless of title.

Academic library participants also enjoyed helping people which is established through their description of a love for teaching and learning. They wanted to continue to learn by connecting with students and helping them with their studies, and this was their reason for choosing this career; and in particular, academic libraries. They described teaching and learning, through their interactions with students and other customers, as one of the most appealing aspects of their work. That connection with the intellectual stimulation found in an academic environment was also expressed in Sare, Bales, and Neville (2012) in their study of academic librarians. In that study, participants were drawn to the noble nature of a career involved with higher education. There are similar expressions between the academic library participants in the current study and Sare, et al.'s study (2012). Curtis explained how he liked the "serendipity of

knowledge falling into [his] hands and being surrounded by learners and teachers”. In Sare et al.’s (2012) study, one participant enjoyed the “scholarship and research” (p. 196) that drew him specifically to academic libraries. Some participants described wanting to make a difference in the world. The desire to help people was the primary theme discovered in Sare et al.’s (2012) study, and it can be argued this was also a primary reason that library paraprofessional participants chose a career in academic libraries.

While other studies validate the growing complexity and available options for paraprofessionals in academic libraries (Dinkins & Ryan, 2010; Gremmels, 2013; Oberg, 1992; Zhu, 2011) they do not grant access to how paraprofessionals make sense of the expanding nature of their work. Dinkins and Ryan (2010) and Gremmels (2013) discuss ‘service’ within the context of reference desk work but are conservative in suggesting what should be the extent of a paraprofessional’s involvement with reference. Dinkins and Ryan (2010) suggest that paraprofessionals should not handle complex reference transactions but could manage basic reference questions that require less training and expertise. Gremmels (2013), on the other hand, encourages the academic library to embrace non-professional library staff and that the core values of librarianship can be shared and taught. It is possible that there are opportunities opening up for paraprofessionals to be involved in tasks such as instruction and more complex reference which makes it possible to activate the teaching and learning interests of paraprofessionals.

### **The right fit.**

The participants in school, academic and public library settings described their careers as being the right fit, meaning it matched their career aspirations and pragmatic

considerations. How participants described the career being the right fit is different between each case (school, academic, and public libraries) but similar between participants in each case. All participants also expressed an intrinsic connection to library work, as though this was their destined career or that they were with “their people”. This is similar to what Simon and Taylor (2011) discovered with their participants in a master’s level library and information science program, where even if the participants took a circuitous route to get there, this career was the realization of their lifelong ambition. There is without a doubt a correlation between professional librarians and library paraprofessionals as to what draws someone to, and sustains, a career in libraries.

Sometimes the right fit meant pragmatic reasons for why the career was a suitable choice for the participant. School library participants appreciated the better working conditions compared to prior occupations or experiencing different library work environments. School librarians in other studies had similar reasons for choosing a career in school libraries, appreciating the work hours plus the appealing work/life balance it offered (Jones, 2010; Shannon, 2008). This was also the finding in Walker and Calvert’s (2016) study of school librarians in New Zealand, where the flexible hours and promise of work/life balance was a primary factor in choosing a career in school libraries. Similarly, participants in this study chose a school library because it offered desirable working conditions such as reasonable hours, vacation time, and a good work/life balance. Library paraprofessionals in this study appear to ascribe to some of the same reasons for pursuing a career in school libraries as professional librarians.

Academic library participants wanted a hands-on, practical career and their career in academic libraries provided it. The findings from academic library participants relate

to Murray and Carroll's (2010) study where participants had chosen the library paraprofessional education path over a graduate-level library program, even though they were qualified to enter graduate school, because they wanted a practical, skills-based education that would get them a job quickly. This is similar to the academic library participants in this current study who pursued a paraprofessional education because they believed it would be a practical-focused program and quicker to finish than a degree or a master's degree in library sciences. Murray and Carroll's (2010) study consisted of vocational students who already held a degree. In this current study, seven of nine academic library participants also held a postsecondary degree.

The findings from this study, however, do not as closely support the findings of the CARL (Canadian Academic and Research Libraries) research which found working conditions to be important to academic library paraprofessionals (DeLong, Sorensen, & Williamson, 2015). Working conditions include work hours, work/life balance, flexibility and work location. The academic library participants did not mention working conditions specifically, but there is a bit of correlation in that "working conditions" might also mean practical work that is quickly attained. The implications for approaches to education and how we provide consultation to those interested in the career will be explored in the final chapter.

The findings from public library participants also matches the findings from Masdonati, et al.'s (2017) study where adults, who were enrolled in vocational education for a career change, chose a diploma-level education (called "vocational" in their study) as a realization of their personal interests and values. Participants wanted an occupation that would allow them to grow personally and which fulfilled those personal interests and values, and a vocational education was thought to provide this (Masdonati, et al., 2017).

Similarly, in this study, the public library participants felt a public library career offered growth and personal connection with values. These participants deliberately chose the public library environment because it offered personal fulfillment, and they were largely content in knowing it was the right fit.

## **Work Relationships**

*Themes discussed: Collaborative and connected; Disconnected; Divided and inferior.*

The findings suggest that relationships formed by library paraprofessionals during school and at work have a substantial impact on their work identity. In work identity research relationships, also referred to as social influences, are heavily emphasized and work identity is considered stronger when the individual feels a sense of connectedness or has “positive relations with valued others” (Swann, Johnson, & Bosson, 2009, p. 85). Positive relationships strongly affect the individual’s sense of belonging and can then increase self-esteem and clarify one’s work identity (Buche, 2006), making for a more motivated employee (Haslam, 2004).

Much of the work identity research in fields where paraprofessionals are located, such as education and nursing, describes social influences as a prominent factor in how identity is constructed and understood (see, for example Edmond & Hayler, 2013; Fryer, Bellamy, Morgan & Gott, 2016; Gray & Lukyanova, 2017; Lively, 2001; Thompson, Cook, & Duschinsky, 2018; Trent, 2014). Work identity research, specifically, has contributed through some studies that emphasize the impact relationships have on identity. For example, the findings from the research on a South African manufacturing company described the key importance that relationships played in the participants’ narratives (Saayman & Crafford, 2011). Through their research, Saayman and Crafford contributed significant theoretical developments that have helped in understanding

identity work as individuals make sense of their social environments and find their own place within that environment. This will be explored further in this section.

In this particular study, across all cases, there were strong social influences which began during the diploma education program. Linda described being with “like-minded” people, that they were with “their people”, as described by Breanna. They continued to nurture many of these connections turned lifelong friendships after school. Once they started their library careers, the connections were described as largely positive with all co-workers, regardless of job title or academic designation. However, in school libraries the participants sometimes felt disconnected from others who work at the school.

Jacqueline told the story of not being informed of a student requiring library time. In academic and public libraries, participants sometimes were divided from and inferior to others in the library workplace, notably professional librarians. Heather, in an academic library described the offices as exclusive to librarians and not available for paraprofessional staff. Susan, in a public library, thought technicians were sometimes treated like they were at “the bottom of the heap”. Feeling inferior, divided, or disconnected can create an uncertain social identity and threaten the paraprofessionals’ sense of belonging in the workplace (Saayman & Crafford, 2011). The themes will be broken down and discussed in more detail next.

### **Collaborative and connected.**

Participants in this study formed strong connections with fellow students in the library paraprofessional diploma program. The participants believed they had found “their people”, a group of like-minded individuals who had similar interests. The camaraderie was unlike any previous postsecondary experiences some may have had, where they did not experience that same sense of connection with other students. Many



friendships developed that continued throughout their lives. The prevalence and significance of social relationships at school is unexplored in library and information sciences literature. But the positive and enduring socialization experiences of these paraprofessionals during their library education might be understood by looking at the common personal attributes and interests with which they entered the program. Studies surrounding the choice of library and information science education (graduate level) show strong common threads to reasons such as choosing the program based on a love of books and reading (Jones, 2010; Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, et al., 2015; Shannon, 2008), an intrinsic interest in the work of libraries (Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, et al., 2015), and a desire to help people (Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, et al., 2015; Rathbun-Grubb & Marshall, 2009). Masdonati, et al. (2017) suggest there are proactive reasons for choosing a vocational career; namely looking for a life change that matched personal values and growth ambitions. Because there are so many common ambitions and personal interests between those who enter a diploma education, it is likely connections will be felt between students, and meaningful relationships develop and continue throughout their careers.

Once in the workplace, they continued to value strong connections and viewed everyone in their team as being of equal value, irrespective of job designation or academic qualifications. This affirms Swann, et al.'s (2009) claim that being connected to people at work and establishing strong social connections is as important to people as the economic benefits of working. Sewell and Gilbert (2015) discovered similar results in their study of access service staff, where a relationship with coworkers was a strong determinant of job satisfaction. Kreitz and Odgen (1990) also reported their participants valued relationships with coworkers as one of highest factors influencing job

satisfaction.

There are some good recommendations for improving relations from Hill (2014), who emphasized the importance of a good relationship between paraprofessionals and profession librarians. Some of Hill's suggestions involve encouraging a high degree of interaction between the two, including things like social events and exchanging jobs for a day; essentially, activities that encourage each to better understand the other at work (Hill, 2014). Hill's study focused on role changes and role overlap as factors that may inhibit good relations, but the study did not explore what type of social connections each wanted or what librarians and paraprofessionals thought might make relations better. It is helpful to examine studies in similar disciplines that also operate in traditionally hierarchical environments, such as the nursing profession. These studies emphasize the importance of having a sense of belonging and strong connections in those work environments. Some studies in the nursing profession have examined the ongoing struggle to define and defend their professional identity claims (Kirpal, 2004; Willetts & Clarke, 2014). Kirpal found those most successful at maintaining a strong work identity remained flexible and open to changes. Those individuals continually redefined and challenged traditional roles, pushed boundaries, and were change agents in how others in the organization viewed them.

Willetts and Clarke (2014) considered belongingness to be a critical factor in the social and professional identity of nurses. The library paraprofessionals in this study are not struggling to create a *professional* identity, but they do wish to claim a strong identity at work, through collaboration and connection with others they work with. An argument can be made that if library paraprofessionals feel connected and having a sense of belonging at work it will create a sense of purpose and value to the work they

do, thus strengthening their overall work identity. It is useful to remember Kirpal's (2004) study in the value of remaining flexible and open to challenging traditional relationship boundaries in order to strengthen work identity, because library paraprofessionals exist in the same hierarchical structure. The library paraprofessionals in the current study enjoy, for the most part, collaborative and connected relationships with others at work, and the research has shown this connectedness is essential to a strong work identity. However, research specifically to do with library paraprofessionals has focused on relationships vis a vis role definition and blurring, (see, for example, Cox & Myers, 2010; Fragola, 2009; Oberg, 1992; Zhu, 2012) as opposed to figuring out how to create, maintain and redefine those strong connections and collaborations.

Participants in this study valued collaboration and connectedness to the extent that for the majority, it is the first thing they mentioned when describing what they enjoy most about their work. They talked about their work activities not as idiosyncratic activities but as work conducted as part of a team. Haslam (2004), in organizational psychology research, argues that an individual's personal identity, or the uniqueness of an individual's thoughts and actions, becomes weaker as the identity with the group becomes stronger. The participants in this study appear to have a stronger group identity than personal identity, because paraprofessionals described themselves in terms of attributes shared with others (shared goals and values, for example). They spoke almost on behalf of other paraprofessionals and discussed their work activity in a collective sense (that is, "we" do this, rather than "I"), which is known as depersonalization (Haslam, 2004). They demonstrate how much they value social connections with statements like "We are such an incredible team" and "The connecting factor is we're all

socially conscious”. They value collective work efforts, as demonstrated by statement such as “The goal is to help the kids—we all have that same purpose”, “We have these overlapping skills”, and “Where one is weaker, the other is stronger”. This is what Hogg and Rinella (2018) referred to as developing a shared identity and shared sense of reality. This is an encouraging and positive finding, because it demonstrates that library paraprofessionals’ beliefs, attitudes and perceptions are part of a shared reality with others; this shared reality can strengthen their own social identity (Hogg & Rinella, 2018) and thus contribute to a healthy and strong work identity.

Library paraprofessionals then, as the findings suggest, think in terms of being a part of a team rather than focused solely on their individual selves. This discovery is opposite to Litwin’s (2009) claim that paraprofessionals are intent on “career advancement and elevated status and little else” (p. 57). Litwin’s argument that paraprofessionals are seeking greater inclusion and recognition, for their own personal status, is not lived out by participants in this study who have demonstrated they derive their greatest sense of purpose and belonging from social inclusion and attributes shared with others, not through a desired status or career advancement.

### **Disconnected/Divided and inferior.**

Despite experiencing some strong social connections, participants also reported a sense of disconnect or inferiority to others in the workplace. A hierarchical work environment and the seemingly arbitrary restrictions on their work frustrate them. Social identity theorists say that there is emotional and value significance attached to group membership (Tajfel, 1972), such as being part of a library team. There are indications in this study that the library paraprofessional’s sense of value and belonging in the workplace is threatened by some negative group experiences.

This is not an uncommon experience for paraprofessionals in other disciplines. There are studies that point to the same sense of loss of value and belonging because of conflict and uncertain social relationships with nursing assistant, paralegal, and educational assistant careers--arguably similar in hierarchical structure. In Gray and Lukyanova's (2017) study, nursing assistants experienced low morality and status and a devaluing of their work despite knowing their work was important to the functioning of the organization. Fryer, et al. (2017) concluded that the hierarchical structure of the organization minimized the role of the nursing assistants which led to them feeling less a part of the team. In Lively's (2001) study, paralegals would try to find ways to elevate their own status in order to deal with the historical, unbending hierarchy of the legal industry. Studies of teacher assistants also indicate identity confusion because of insecurities between teachers and teacher assistants—the historically superior and subordinate positions lead the way for role ambiguity and role conflict (Edmond & Hayler, 2013; Trent, 2014).

This situation, then, is not unique to the library workplace. In all of these parallel cases, paraprofessionals sensed a lack of value and belonging in the workplace because of a perceived attitude that their role was inferior. It is not just the library paraprofessionals in this study; it is somewhat pandemic to paraprofessionals in general. Paraprofessionals are skilled workers, but perhaps because they are skilled, they experience a devaluing even more. They believe their role is equally valuable to those with a higher status, usually those classified as professionals, but those higher do not reciprocate. Similar to these other disciplines, the public and academic participants in the current study described a sense of division and inferiority to professional library staff. They felt as though they were “just the tech”, or at the “bottom of the heap”. They described not

being allowed to do certain tasks they knew they were capable for the only reason that they were not a librarian. Sometimes it was “very exclusionary”, and a “better than, less than” environment. An “us versus them” relationship had developed, and they are unsure why. A few library and information science studies acknowledge the relationship tension as a result of changing role boundaries (Fragola, 2009; Hill, 2014; Russell, 1985).

Russell’s (1985) study on the perceived threat to professional status was ahead of its time by acknowledging that the division is a result of historical practices. In a later decade, Litwin (2009) confirmed that deprofessionalization, or paraprofessionals taking over professional work, is a genuine threat to professional librarian status and values. There is the broader issue of the legitimacy of the gendered profession of librarianship in the first place, and then there are those “less than” librarian (that is, paraprofessionals) struggling for value recognition and compensation (Neigel, 2016). Russell and Neigel, unlike Litwin, encourage a breaking down of the barriers and a more collegial environment of equal opportunity, which some participants in this study would also like to see happen.

In Hill’s more recent study of 200 library paraprofessionals and librarians in Australia regarding role overlap and relationships at work, paraprofessional reported their opinions were often discounted or ignored. However, Fragola’s case study of public library workers in North Carolina attempted to discover whether an in-group bias existed but found neither paraprofessionals nor professionals exhibited in-group bias to the extent that previous literature and professional lore had claimed. The findings from this current study are similar in that there is little evidence that paraprofessionals categorize themselves exclusively, and display “in-group favoritism” (Haslam, 2004, p. 19).

Paraprofessionals in this study do not discriminate in favour of their own group, at the expense of the “out” group and in fact, spoke of disappointment that divisions existed at

all. This demonstrates that what they might consider their in-group is the library team as a whole and disappointment came from members of their own in-group (particularly, professional librarians and administration) not fully appreciating what they, as paraprofessionals, could contribute to the library team. In-group bias, like Fragola's study, is not a strong characteristic of these library paraprofessionals; but there are factors that restrict a stronger group dynamic between librarians and paraprofessionals.

Moreover, literature reports that task overlaps and role blurring has created some confusion in the library work environment and tension between professional librarians and paraprofessionals (Fragola, 2009; James, Shamchuk, & Koch, 2015; Oberg, 1992; Zhu, 2012). The findings indicate that this role ambiguity primarily affects academic and public library paraprofessionals (school library environments are less likely to have both a librarian and paraprofessional working together). As far back as 1992, Oberg, Mentges, McDermott, and Harusadangkul had warned that clearer delineation between tasks in academic libraries was necessary because paraprofessionals were performing more complex duties once the domain of professional librarians. The fact that some academic library paraprofessionals, in particular, are still discouraged by limitations to their roles indicates that libraries, in the twenty-five years plus since Oberg's study, have not fully addressed or clarified role overlap. Oberg et al.'s (1992) study and other studies since have not addressed the impact role overlap might have on the relationship between the paraprofessional and professional librarian. Academic library participants in the current study described their roles as clearly defined but are unhappy with the limitations placed on their work that makes them feel inferior. Public library participants also seem clear on their role definition, but the biggest issue is sensing a disrespect for the work they do or a that paraprofessionals do not make equally valuable contributions to the

workplace. Studies sporadically mention this discontent (Cox & Myers, 2010; James, et al., 2015; Leong & Davidson, 2011) but for the most part, the only suggestion is that role clarification will solve the issue of an undervaluing of their work (Cox & Myers, 2010). Fragola (2009) provides some solutions to improving the relationship between paraprofessional and professional librarians by suggesting equal participation in training and professional development opportunities and as much intergroup contact as possible. Library leadership can also positively impact the relationship if leadership remains open to new ideas, and to fostering opportunities for all employees (Fragola, 2009).

The notion of increased training is supported in the discipline of education. Downing, Ryndak, and Clark (2000) found in their study that with the increased complexity in the paraeducators' role working with disabled students, more continuing education support was needed. Paraeducators were assuming greater responsibilities but lacked support, leading them to feel devalued and excluded from the team. Irvin, et al. (2018) urged more formalized training of paraprofessionals in education as their role shifts from instructional assistant to more of an active educational support role. Their study, interestingly, found that professionals (that is, teachers) supported and felt more positive about relationships with competent paraprofessionals, and supplied less support and training for paraprofessionals they considered less competent (Irvin, et al., 2018). They had difficult establishing relationships with those paraprofessionals that required greater supervision and support. The study suggested that higher education institutions should provide better training for teachers on how to supervise and manage the work of paraprofessionals in the workforce, thus improving overall relationships and help the paraprofessionals to feel valued and competent. Edmond and Hayler (2013) similarly suggested that a more "democratic conception of professionalism in education" (p. 220)



would help to soften the divisions between teacher assistants and teachers in education and help all to feel supported in their increasingly complex roles. It can be argued that these are comparable studies in other disciplines on issues regarding relationships in the workplace that might help to shed light on both changing roles and professional-paraprofessional relationships.

### **Work Activities**

*Themes discussed: Misconceptions; Voice and agency; Deeper meaning; Salary; Job security.*

The findings from this study suggest a connection between work activities, that is, the roles and responsibilities and the construction of a paraprofessional's work identity. Besides personal and social influences at work, an individual's job tasks and organizational structure (meaning how the work is distributed and organized) influence work identity (Karpal, 2004; Saayman & Crafford, 2011). The roles, or the work that an individual performs, impact the personal development of a worker and will determine "the extent to which work is both meaningful and challenging" (Crafford et al, 2015, p. 71). An individual who considers their work meaningful will have a stronger work identity than one who does not sense meaning in their work (Crafford et al, 2015). The participants in this study, as demonstrated in the Findings chapter, consider their work to be meaningful and challenging. The following discussion explores the perceptions of library paraprofessionals with regards to their work activities.

#### **Misconceptions.**

Participants in all library environments in this study described the library paraprofessional career as more complex and with greater possibilities than they expected when they first considered this career choice. But they realized that those outside the

field, as well as themselves before entering the field, had misconceptions about what was involved in library work. While they realized this career is largely misunderstood by others (or by themselves, when they first entered the career), they spoke with pride, not frustration, about how complex the work is, and that library work is more than meets the eye.

These misconceptions started in their library diploma education and continued into the workplace; sometimes it was not necessarily a negative, such as when they spoke with pride about the complexity to their work. For example, Debra explained, “It’s not all about the books ... it is far more complex than you would think.” School library participants emphasized the greater complexities of the role than taking care of the library collection; that they often act as a counsellor or guide and must communicate with a variety of individuals from students to parents to administrators. Academic library participants mentioned how flexible and dynamic the academic library environment was and they emphasized opportunities brought about as a result of the constantly changing library environment. Public library participants, both in technical and public services, saw a greater depth to career opportunities and advised to look at the big picture and stay open to possibilities. They also commented on the complexity of the work; in particular, the emotional labour of the job.

These findings affirm the literature on the increased complexity of paraprofessional work (Cox & Myers, 2010; Erb & Erb, 2015; Jacobs & Raju, 2008; James, et al., 2015; Zhu, 2012). Paraprofessionals in this study spoke of complex career options (academic participants), complex public service responsibilities (school participants), and both the variety of work and emotional labour of work (public participants). Several participants in public libraries filled managerial roles (for example,

Jason, Megan, and Melissa) and most school library participants independently managed their library, indicating greater depth and opportunities as suggested by Raju and Jacobs (2008). The academic library participants believe that there are opportunities and variety to their roles and this is affirmed by Zhu's study. Zhu (2012) suggested paraprofessionals are assigned more complex duties than in the past. Oberg's 1992 study stated that few duties are off limits to the academic library paraprofessional. According to the participants in this study, this claim still holds true. The participants in this study are also similar to the participants from the human resources study of Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) where it was reported that having challenging, creative, interesting, and varied work was one of the most-liked aspects of the job for academic library paraprofessionals (DeLong, et al., 2015). The academic library participants in this study also enjoyed challenging and varied work in an academic setting.

Those library paraprofessionals in public library technical services also viewed their work as significant and complex and saw their positions expanding beyond just cataloguing work. This supports previous research which states paraprofessionals are assuming more advanced technical services work (Bordeianu & Seiser, 1999; Cox & Myers, 2010; Erb & Erb, 2015; Younger, 1996; Zhu, 2012). However, none of this previous research has shown evidence of, or speculated, that paraprofessionals in technical services may be assuming other non-technical duties, thus expanding the depth and range of their responsibilities. Interestingly, many of the technical service paraprofessionals in this study indicated their jobs are adjusting to encompass more than their cataloguing duties. For example, Jason worked as a manager and foresaw technical services people doing public service duties as well. Michelle and Angela were both also

assuming other tasks to their regular cataloguing work. Previous research (see for example, Bordeianu & Seiser, 1999; Cox & Myers, 2010; Zhu, 2012) on paraprofessionals in technical services focuses on paraprofessionals assuming the tasks previously under professional librarian jurisdiction, or on the precarious nature of technical services work in light of technological advancements. No research discusses a paraprofessional expanding beyond technical services and cross training into other departments, but participants in this study indicate that it is happening in their work. This might even be a new trend since Zhu's article, which appears to be the most recent research examining library paraprofessional technical services roles.

Participants in this study from all cases viewed their roles positively and described their work as complex; however, the misconceptions also masked the complexities of this career. These misconceptions began during their paraprofessional education as evidenced by the number of students that seemed to enter the program with the view it would be easy work or suitable to someone socially awkward. The number of people in the program that didn't seem to belong—and although she did not describe specifically why this was her perception—it surprised Anna, a school library technician who graduated over thirty years ago. Her comment that “we were always carrying these people” suggests these other students were academically weak, yet a library paraprofessional career was provided as an option because those who are outside of library work assumed the job, and therefore the schooling, to be easy. This affirms Vassilakaki and Moniarou-Papaconstantinou (2014), whose study concluded that those outside of libraries are largely unaware of the complexities of library work. The participants in this study routinely encountered people who mistakenly perceived a library career to be easy and quiet work, centered on books. For example, Megan said

she saw it all the time—applicants for public service jobs who put on their resume that they love reading and that qualified them for public service work. These findings also agree with the systematic review of Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, et al. (2015) where a love for books and reading influenced the choice of graduate-level library education program, but the findings also demonstrate how these motivators are not always enough to sustain interest and guarantee an aptitude in the career. As Anna experienced, at least one quarter of the students did not survive after the first semester.

These participants encountered some of the same stereotypes—namely, that library workers must be bookworms and introverts—that professional librarians experienced as outlined in the literature (Hicks, 2016; McMenemy & Luthmann, 2007; Nilsen & McKechnie, 2002; Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014). School library participants in this study fought misconceptions about the contemporary library and its purpose. Brenda discovered this in the process of transforming her high school library and removing the security gates. The participants saw evidence that the public perception of library work was uninformed and outdated, much like what Vassilakaki and Moniarou-Papaconstantinou (2014) discovered in their systematic review of literature on images within the library and information science profession. Paula’s story about her autistic stepson, and how social services kept referring him to the library program, illustrates this well.

There may be some instability to a paraprofessional’s work identity as a result of others’ negative or outdated assumptions of their work. As we know, paraprofessionals (in multiple disciplines, not just libraries) are performing more complex work that was previously not their domain (Downing, et al., 2000; Edmond & Hayler, 2013; James, et al., 2015), and while paraprofessionals seem both satisfied and clear as to any role or

responsibility adjustments, others (in libraries or the general public) may not have ‘caught up’.

This tension between individual role clarity and social perception has been addressed by work identity literature and is referred to as the relationship between individual agency and social practice (Crafford, et al., 2015; Giddens, 1991). As Crafford et al. (2015) argue, a strong work identity is built through the capacity to become an active player in the construction of one’s own work identity, and not just assume the identity assigned to them. There is some tension as paraprofessionals assume a new “identity” at work, which involves greater individual agency and ability to direct their own work, while at the same time others (professional librarians, administration, and the public) still assign to them traditional, passive roles that were once their reality. There are multiple examples of the consequences of the redefinition of roles in paraprofessional work; namely Edmond and Hayler (2013) where teacher assistants, despite taking on more complex roles are considered “not quite teachers” (p. 216); Irvin, et al. (2018) with increased responsibilities of special education assistants yet lacking in training and support; Trent (2014) where conflict and uncertainty is a result of increased complex duties of teacher assistants; and Gray and Lukyanova (2017) in which nursing assistants experience low status - despite their important work with resident care - as a result of a devaluing from management. Thompson, et al (2018), studying nursing home nurses, is unique in that it studies work identity in particular, and the effects of unrecognized, complex work on identity. These recent studies indicate an active search in understanding how to strengthen the identity of these increasingly complex roles that are historically devalued or misunderstood. The hope is that parallel literature of other paraprofessionals can be drawn on in order to better understand how to strengthen (and

perhaps create anew) work identity of library paraprofessionals and create a work environment where contributions are unconditionally valued.

### **Voice and agency**

Participants in this study, in particular from school and academic library settings, placed a high degree of value on having a voice and the ability to direct their own work. They appreciate when their opinions are acknowledged, as it affirms their role on the front lines as the ones who may be “in the know”. Heather used her mother’s experience of having voice as a nurse, and Rachel, in academic libraries, also affirmed that the front line worker should always be consulted. Those in supervisory roles, such as Debra, advised that asserting one’s voice was essential in order to claim ownership on one’s job. The findings from academic library participants in particular seem to affirm DeLong, et al., (2015) in that paraprofessionals, of all academic library staff, were least likely to report that they are able to contribute meaningfully at work, and that their accomplishments are recognized. The CARL study also found that having their skills underutilized was the most disliked aspect of their job (DeLong, et al., 2015). Although DeLong’s study encompasses academic library paraprofessionals only, it is evident that there is a correlation to the school and public library paraprofessionals in the current study. Overall, participants in the current study seem to be more content that they are valued and able to contribute than those in DeLong, et al.’s (2015) study, but they still sometimes believe their voice is not heard.

Based on findings from research in similar paraprofessional disciplines, independent decision-making helps one to feel valued and satisfied with one’s work (see, for example, Bishop, et al., 2009). However conversely, being alone in the decision-making can create uncertainty if one is unsure that they are qualified to make the decision

or that their decision will receive support (Downing, et al., 2000). Brenda, in her school library, expressed this concern when she said, “I’m not always listened to” and found it hard because she was only one voice. It affected her sense of confidence, but she wanted desperately to be heard and respected. Similarly, the lack of control over their work caused nursing assistants in Gray and Lukyanova’s (2017) study feel devalued and disrespected. A balance must be struck between being a “valuable member of the team, but not *the* member of the team” (Downing, et al., 2000, p. 180).

Public library participants enjoyed being a contributing member of the organization (this was Kendra’s reason for pursuing a career in public libraries). School and academic library participants also said how important it was to have their ideas and opinions taken into consideration in order to feel as though they were contributing. This is similar to the findings of the 8Rs Research Team (2005) where the most important influence on job satisfaction amongst librarians and library paraprofessionals was to be respected by their superiors and their work affirmed. This desire to be heard and for opinions to be respected affirms work identity theorists such as Saayman and Crafford (2011) and Crafford, et al. (2015). They argue that having the opportunity to express one’s opinion and to have that opinion validated is a significant motivator to perform better and can increase one’s self-esteem at the same time (Crafford, et al., 2015). Some research suggests changes in policy in order for the paraprofessional’s involvement in decision making to be more overtly recognized (Gray & Lukyanova, 2017). Higher levels of job satisfaction can result. This was also argued in Downing, et al.’s (2000) investigation of paraeducators, where they advised a change in policies and procedures which would allow for more attentive training and support of paraeducators. This sends a message to the paraeducators that their expertise and contributions are valuable.



Research, however, on library paraprofessional perceptions of their roles rarely addresses the importance of having a voice and the ability to direct their own work. An exception may be Moriarity (1982) who strongly argued that library paraprofessionals' contributions deserve to be acknowledged. However, Moriarity (1982) was suggesting paraprofessionals use their voice to address issues that concern their "profession", putting them in an arguably awkward position of defence rather than participation in the conversation. For example, in Han and Chaudhry's (2000) study, library paraprofessionals are amenable to new responsibilities in public service but show no indication that they are interested in having more autonomy or opportunity to direct their work. It is possible that the environment of work has changed since the research by Han and Chaudhry, and with the influx of research surrounding the changing roles of library staff, the area of voice and agency to direct work will come more into the limelight. So far, it has not.

There may be some tension between the paraprofessional's ability to direct their own work, and the traditional roles and responsibilities that library organizations maintain. Similar to the participants in the current study, Gray and Lukyanova's (2017) nursing assistants were empowered by their work with their clients yet devalued because of the organization's limitations on what they could do. As noted previously, the changing library environment is introducing paraprofessionals to more sophisticated responsibilities (Cox & Myers, 2010; Gremmels, 2013; James, et al., 2015; Oberg, 1992; Younger, 1996; Zhu, 2012) and this may place the paraprofessional in roles where a stronger voice and greater agency at work is not just desired but required. Some participants are still fighting the tension between old and new expectations and are struggling to be taken seriously and for their perspective to be respected. School library

participants particularly noticed this gap as they must aggressively and continuously promote their worth.

### **Deeper meaning**

All participants in this study were fulfilled not only by the specific work they did, but also by the deeper meaning they perceived their work to hold. Public and school library participants described their work as having meaning beyond just performing the day-to-day tasks. Academic library participants did not describe their work in the same way, although within the context of teaching and learning, they talked about how meaningful it was to be a part of a student's success. All participants in some way, and at some point, described their work as having meaning. This follows the work of Masdonati, et al. (2017) where students enrolled in vocational education wanted a career that would closely fit their work values and also match their personal, ethical principles. In this study, participants described a connection between the work they do and the ethical meaning they desired from work. Kendra, for example, was looking to contribute to the greater cause of library work, not just looking for a job to get paid.

School library participants were rich with stories that described meaningful connections with children that gave their work meaning as well. Anna wanted to be a part of a young adult's life in providing a safe space for them to discover something about themselves. Both public and school library participants mentioned the library as a "safe place" which to them, meant they were fulfilling their purpose.

Chalofsky (2010) emphasized the importance of work itself to one's sense of self and personal fulfillment. Meaning at work brings meaning and purpose to life, or creates value to one's work (Chalofsky, 2010). This applies to any work—not just professional or well-credentialed careers; Saayman and Crafford's (2011) study determined that with

manufacturing company workers, they “valued meaningful, challenging and interesting work” (p. 10) indicating one does not have to have a prestigious or more identifiable professional career in order to want it to be meaningful. Gray and Lukyanova (2017) in their examination of the work identity of nursing assistants found their participants felt a higher calling to the profession and believed in the inherent value of their work.

Similarly, the participants in the current study all expressed more significant meanings to the work they did; it was more than just a nine to five job that paid the bills. They were guided by a higher calling without differentiating between their role and others. As Paula said in regard to her school library administration, “We’re in it together and the goal is to help the kids - we all have that same purpose.” If this is the perspective of library paraprofessionals regarding their work, there is an argument that their work would benefit if it were guided by the same formal core values as librarianship.

The American Library Association published a Core Values of Librarianship (ALA, 2004), which, as mentioned earlier in this study, appears to attribute these values only to professional librarians. Scholars often refer to the ALA core values but steadfastly equate the values to professional librarianship alone; the core values define (and sets apart from other library workers) librarianship as a profession (Crowley, 2012; Gorman, 2015). As there is no similar set of core values for library paraprofessionals, one might draw on these values to represent the deeper meaning behind paraprofessional library work. Several of ALA’s core values seem to apply here, in terms of participants’ descriptions of the meaning behind their work. Public and school library participants speak of ‘access’ to information (Brenda’s description of removing the security gates), confidentiality (Anna’s description of understanding the need for privacy), democracy (Christy ensuring she will not judge anyone who comes in), diversity (Anna describing

the library as a space for everyone), education and lifelong learning (Margaret describing the joy of a student succeeding), intellectual freedom (Susan, in technical services, describing her role in granting access to information), the public good (Kendra describing her work in providing a space for the marginalised), service (Alicia, in describing the valuable service school libraries provide in terms of developing readers), and social responsibility (all the above are examples of socially responsible approaches to their work). Other work on the core values of librarianship done by Gorman (2015) and Foster and McMenemy (2012) affirm similar values attributed to librarianship. Foster and McMenemy (2012), in their study of 36 core value lists from national associations found the most commonly mentioned values and therefore the most enduring, were service, privacy, equity of access, stewardship and intellectual freedom. Gorman (2015) provided a similar list, with these same five with the addition of rationalism, literacy and learning, and democracy. The connections between the library paraprofessionals' engagement with their work in this study and these various lists of core values are arguably very strong. There may be some ways of enacting these values that are outside the domain of a library paraprofessional's work. For example, stewardship is involved with "designing and implementing effective collaborative schemes to preserve recorded knowledge and information" (Gorman, 2015, p. 89) (although, arguably, a library paraprofessional in a leadership or managerial role could affect this goal). However, stewardship also involves "doing good work and earn the trust and respect of the communities we serve" (Gorman, 2015, p. 90), an activity well within the realm of library paraprofessional work in any library work environment. The argument here is that core values are by no means exclusive to professional librarians. This supports Jacobs and Raju (2008) in that there may be a need for broader skill development of library paraprofessionals.

### **Job security/Salary**

To these participants, there was a sense of security when they could see their work was valued by their coworkers and by administration or managers. For some participants, being part of a union and holding permanent status led to security in their job, but the majority of the participant's comments equated security with others knowing and acknowledging their worth in the workplace. Comments like "they do appreciate the work I do, so I feel secure", "Everything is secure because I know people respect me", and "My skills are valued by the people I work with, so that makes me feel secure", connects security to value. Job security is a factor in creating a positive work identity (de Braine & Roodt, 2015). Employees who are insecure in their jobs are less engaged in their work (de Braine & Roodt, 2015). There is evidence from the comments that these participants feel secure and valued, therefore contributing to a stronger work identity. The findings affirm the Delong, et al (2015) study in that intrinsic reasons (such as feeling valued, respected, and having work that is rewarding) are the most important elements for paraprofessionals at work. It also follows the 8Rs Research Team (2005) study that found one of the most important contributing factors to job satisfaction amongst paraprofessionals was to be treated with respect by their superiors. This study follows these findings in that participants largely describe their work in terms of intrinsic elements, and even extrinsic elements like salary are tied to a desire to feel valued and to have their work respected.

Line and Kinnell (1993) define job satisfaction as an emotional feeling that is the "result from the perception that one's job fulfills or allows the fulfillment of one's important job values, providing and to the degree that those values are congruent with one's needs (p. 1307). There is a connection between job satisfaction and feeling valued,

as job satisfaction is an emotion, not necessarily a measurable outcome of work. Using this definition of job satisfaction, one might conclude that the paraprofessionals in this study experienced high levels of job satisfaction because they felt secure (and valued) in their work

Not all participants experienced security. The precarious nature of work created some insecurity; for example, precariousness caused by management decisions (Lisa had a distrust of what management might do), the changing nature of their work (e.g. Jason and Diana concerned about cataloguing outsourcing), and non-permanent status (Christy not landing full time work despite experience). Precarious work, meaning “uncertain, unstable, and insecure [work] in which employees bear the risks of work and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections” (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017, p. 1), describes the experiences of some of these participants. Salary can be another cause of uncertainty, or precariousness, of work. School library paraprofessionals were, however, the only participants to express dissatisfaction with wages. The participants reported their wage did not reflect the complex work they were doing. There are no hiring standards for school libraries, and paraprofessionals usually operate in a non-unionized environment. Their wages appear to be disproportionately low to the level of responsibility they have in their work. The fact that school library participants mention salary as an issue follows the findings by the 8Rs Research Team (2005) where the survey measured salary satisfaction amongst library paraprofessionals in Canada and found school library paraprofessionals to be the lowest in satisfaction rating. In the 2005 study, the researchers suggested that library administrators and those in control of salaries consider the growing responsibilities of the library paraprofessional in the future, when determining appropriate salary levels. In a more recent study specific to academic library

workers, however, salary was still found to be important to academic library paraprofessionals; earning a fair salary was in the top ten of important job elements (DeLong, et al., 2015). The study concluded that there was still a fairly high level of dissatisfaction amongst library paraprofessionals. Although this was specific to academic library paraprofessionals, there may be some transferability to paraprofessionals in other library workplaces such as school and public libraries. Because all paraprofessionals in this current study expressed similar thoughts on job security and job satisfaction, we might assume similar thoughts on salary ranges as a factor in job satisfaction.

### **Discussion on Research Questions**

The chapter thus far has related the study's themes to the corresponding literature and has been discussed under the umbrella of work identity and social identity theory. Now these findings will be considered within the context of the research questions. To repeat, this study was framed by the question, "In what ways are library paraprofessionals' work identities formed?" The three sub-questions that helped to provide focus to the study are (1) How do post-secondary programs that educate students to be library paraprofessionals shape their work identity? (2) How do relationships within a work context shape work identity in library paraprofessionals? (3) How do roles and responsibilities of library paraprofessionals shape their work identity?

Individuals subjectively assess work identity. People look for a job that allows for personal development and congruence with their personal identity; they look for meaningful and challenging work, and they desire a sense of belonging through relationships at work (Saayman & Crafford, 2011). The research sub-questions provide exploration of these measures of work identity assessment. This current study affirms that library paraprofessionals' work identity is formed equally by all three of these

factors: post-secondary programs, relationships, and roles and responsibilities, with personal identity woven throughout as a factor that also influences how people perceive and shape their work identity.

### **How do post-secondary programs shape work identity in library paraprofessionals?**

The findings suggest that post-secondary programs help to shape the work identity of paraprofessionals. The findings were discussed earlier in this study and framed by themes that described paraprofessionals and their post-secondary experiences. Those elements of a paraprofessional's personal identity that brought them into the program also influenced their identity once they were at work. Paraprofessionals noted their personal interest in books, reading and libraries as a factor in choosing a paraprofessional career (Books, reading and libraries). They were drawn to library work because of an interest in working with people (Helping people, Teaching and learning). All paraprofessionals in the study were certain the career fit their personal and practical requirements (The right fit).

These findings support work identity research from Saayman and Crafford (2011) in that postsecondary education is one of the formative events that influence work identity. In addition, the findings affirm Crafford et al.'s (2011) research that personal attributes and characteristics, those "relatively stable components of personhood seated in personality" (p. 61), factor into the construction of a person's work identity. In the cases of school, academic, and public library paraprofessionals, personal attributes influenced their decision to pursue this particular career and helped to create a positive work identity. Participants in this study entered postsecondary first and foremost because of their personal interests, their history with libraries, and the match to their value system - the very things that contribute to a strong work identity, according to Crafford et al.



(2011).

This study's findings show that the stable features of the participants' personal identity, including personal interests and attributes, personal history with libraries, and their individual value systems are validated through their work as library paraprofessionals. Their personal identity provided a strong self-concept and sense of purpose, as they gained experience as a paraprofessional. In other words, the person they were before entering school was largely the same as the person I spoke to. Postsecondary programs helped to shape work identity in paraprofessionals, but only in that the experience validated and confirmed those personal factors that drew them to the program.

Post-secondary programs played a more significant role in shaping the social aspects of the paraprofessionals' work identity. They started to sense that they were with "their people" while taking the diploma program. Participants talked about the camaraderie between people in the program and how they had similar personalities, work ethics, and socially conscious mindsets. They were quick to notice when someone didn't seem to belong or didn't share the same commitment or place the same value on the education and subsequent career. This only reinforced the sense that they 'belonged'. A strong group of like-minded individuals emerged from the post-secondary program, which helped to contribute to a strong social identity amongst library paraprofessionals. In recounting their post-secondary experiences, they expressed what Tajfel (1972) conceptualized as social identity; or, "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" (p. 292). Emotional (for example, "It finally felt like I had found my place") and value (for example, "Everyone has the same interests and we were there for the same reason") significance rang clear during the participants' recount of their

postsecondary experiences. When they were asked to talk about their experiences during the diploma program, they spoke mainly about relationships, how they felt part of a team, and the lifelong friendships that were formed. It is argued here that the development of a strong social identity during postsecondary education provided the foundation for a strong social identity in the workplace. A strong social identity may lead to more productive, optimistic workers (Haslam, 2004) so indeed postsecondary education may be critical in the development of positive and productive library paraprofessionals.

The findings suggest that post-secondary programs have an influence on the development of a paraprofessional's work identity. Those stable features of the paraprofessionals' personal identity; their personal interests and attributes, their personal history with libraries, and their values system were validated and continued to develop in their paraprofessional career.

### **How do relationships within a work context shape work identity in library paraprofessionals?**

The findings are confirmation that relationships paraprofessionals engage in at work have a largely positive influence on the formation of their work identity but with some barriers to a positive sense of belonging. The findings were discussed earlier in this study and framed by themes that described paraprofessionals and their work relationships.

The structure of self, according to work identity theorists, is understood through various identity theories (Bothma, Lloyd & Khapova, 2015); social identity theory is used in this study to describe, in part, the construction of work identity in paraprofessionals. Swann, et al. (2009) highlight connectedness as an important factor in the construction of work identity. Possessing a social identity, or identity derived from group membership, gives a person a sense of belonging somewhere (Bothma, et

al., 2015). Work identity is constructed through group membership or social interactions at work and the pivotal question to be answered is: how do we see ourselves? (Lloyd, Roodt, & Odendaal, 2011).

The social aspects to work are vitally important in influencing work identity. There are two key assertions that show the ways in which relationships influence the work identity of library paraprofessionals in this study. One assertion is that group membership is important to participants and influences how they perceive work, and they value belonging in the group more than personal gain. In this study, participants did not see themselves as isolated individual workers, nor did they necessarily group themselves with only paraprofessionals. They felt part of a larger team, fully integrated, and (usually) a valued member of the entire work team. A second assertion is that a sense of inferiority inhibits paraprofessional work identity. Having emotional and value significance in the work they do is so important in creating a healthy social and work identity, but sometimes this is lacking in the paraprofessional's work environment. These assertions hold true for other discipline where paraprofessionals are located (see for example, teaching assistants in Downing, et al., 2000; nursing assistants in Fryer, et al., 2016 and in Gray & Lukyanova, 2017).

Participants derived their sense of value and belonging from group membership, not through personal gain. Buche's (2008) definition of work identity recognizes the importance of group membership in constructing a strong work identity. Work identity is a "socially constructed representation of an individual's unique self-perception of his/her own interactions with the employment environment" (Buche, 2008, p. 134). The social influence of work identity is apparent in this definition. As the social influence grows, personal uniqueness diminishes. Or as Burke and Stets (2009) describe, the

stronger the social influence the greater the instance of depersonalization.

Depersonalization occurs when individuals see themselves as part of a group with the attributes of that group more strongly than as an individual with a unique persona (Haslam, 2004). In this study, participants emphasized the value of belonging to a group over personal gain. For example, school library participants described needing to have a voice not for personal gain, but for the sake of the library and the students.

Depersonalization does not imply that one loses their individual self—these participants still described their unique needs and personal interests with emphasis—but that having a strong, social group with which to identify and derive belonging, was more important. This shifts the focus from “I” to “we” and gives meaning to the work they do and also strengthens the group as a whole. If paraprofessionals think only in terms of “I” and do not have a sense of belonging to a particular group, it can affect their job satisfaction and their performance (Haslam, 2004). Without a positive group identity, the work they do will hold little meaning or value (Burke & Stets, 2009). Participants in this study derive their value and sense of belonging from the groups in which they identify, whether that be a specific library team (for example, Jason, in a technical services department), the library as a whole (e.g. Melissa, in a small, urban public library), or the organization (e.g. Brenda, in a high school library). Those whose social identities are weak; that is, where they lack a sense of belonging at work, recognize their malaise and strive to figure out how to change the situation (e.g. Christy, isolated and undervalued in a rural public library or Linda, alone in a rural school library).

Relationships also influence work identity when the individual has a sense of inferiority; they may resist fully engaging as a member of the group and reduce their sense of belonging and value. This may work to create uncertainty in their work identity

(Crafford, et al., 2015; Saayman & Crafford, 2011). Because the library paraprofessional values group membership over personal gain, the tension is not so much belonging versus individual agency, as described by work identity theorists (Crafford, et al, 2015). In other words, there is no evidence to suggest a conflict between the paraprofessionals' need to belong and their need for individualization. The tension exists solely in their sense of belonging, which can then prevent them from maintaining a positive individual perception of self. When this tension occurs, individuals engage in identity work to resolve and improve their situation (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). Identity work is a complex process, an ongoing negotiation between individual and social angst and conflict (Alvesson, et al., 2008). This happens because, for one, there is an inconsistency between one's own self-perception and external challenges to that perception (Alvesson, et al., 2008). This is precisely what is happening to these participants; while their own personal and social identities are strong, these identities are threatened by external forces such as historical hierarchical structures at work that tell them they can't do what they know they are capable of doing.

Hierarchy in organizations, even if not deliberately described as such, can still exist in more subtle ways that contradict the overt message that everyone is part of 'the team' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Identity is threatened when library paraprofessionals not only feel their contribution to the workplace is undervalued (Fragola, 2009; Hill, 2014), but when the workplace fails to provide a clear definition as to what constitutes being a paraprofessional (Cox & Myers, 2010; Howarth, 1998; Leong & Davidson, 2011; Oberg, 1992). For these reasons, a library paraprofessional's work identity is compromised, as they negotiate between positive notions of self and group and negative discourse from the library workplace historically and in contemporary settings.

The findings are confirmation that relationships, or social influences, have a largely positive impact on the formation of a library paraprofessional's work identity, but that major barriers are in place that may inhibit the paraprofessional's otherwise strong sense of belonging in the workplace. It is vital that these paraprofessionals possess a strong social identity, or identity derived from group membership, in order to develop a sense of belonging that is needed in order to strengthen their work identity.

### **How do roles and responsibilities of library paraprofessionals shape their work identity?**

The findings suggest that the paraprofessionals' job and role context have a largely positive influence on the formation of their work identity. Job and role context include "the tasks, activities, responsibilities, and demands associated with the individual's work role" (Crafford, et al., 2015, p. 71). Meaningful and challenging work is considered to be one of the key factors that need to be considered in the construction of work identity (Crafford, et al., 2015). The findings were discussed earlier in this study and framed by themes discovered from how paraprofessionals described their work activities. Paraprofessionals perceived their jobs as more complex than those external to the role might assume and battled misconceptions that they felt masked the complexity of this career (Misconceptions); they placed a high degree of value on having a voice and the ability to direct their own work (Voice and agency); they described their work as having meaning beyond the performance of day-to-day tasks (Deeper meaning); and they attributed their sense of job security to valued work by the administration or management, and by others they worked with (Job security). Some believed their salary was not reflective of the complexity of the tasks they took part in.

Roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals have a strong influence on the formation of their work identity, both positively and negatively. There are three key

findings that show the ways in which roles and responsibilities influence work identity in the library paraprofessionals in this study. First, meaningful and challenging work is essential to strong work identity. Meaningful and challenging work to these paraprofessionals involves complex and deeply rewarding tasks where the paraprofessional is also allowed individual agency to direct his or her own work. Second, when traditional interpretations and misconceptions of the paraprofessionals' roles come up against the paraprofessionals' perception of what they are capable of doing, work identity is severely compromised and restricted. Third, when paraprofessionals knew that the organization and those within the organization valued their work, they felt secure and therefore could develop a strong work and organizational identity. Each of these key findings are discussed in more detail here.

First, roles and responsibilities influence and strengthen work identity through meaningful and challenging work. Challenging work will bring about a high level of engagement with work activities and a willingness and desire to stick with this particular line of work as opposed to looking elsewhere (Crafford, et al., 2015). This is evidenced by the number of late-career paraprofessionals who loved their work and were highly engaged and invested because of the deep meaning it brought to them. Work that has deeper, psychological meaning is seen to be a central life interest; meaning, that work is considered to be a main component in their life (Bothma, et al., 2015). These participants, in all arenas of library workplaces, described their work as deeply meaningful. Work becomes meaningful when the individual becomes an "active role player" (Crafford, et al., 2015, p. 63) in constructing their identity. When people have the opportunity to shape their daily work, they derive a deeper sense of purpose and their identity is stronger as a result. Most participants in this study were confident in their role

in the workplace, but those who didn't have that opportunity to play an active role felt a lack of purpose that led to questioning their decision to become a paraprofessional.

The second way in which roles and responsibilities influence the construction of work identity is a negative; it is when traditional interpretations cause misconceptions of their roles to occur. These conflicts can compromise a strong work identity. As articulated in the literature for the past few decades, there is some confusion around workplace responsibilities, particularly the division between paraprofessional and professional labour. A fair amount of research has been conducted surrounding paraprofessional role changes and a blurring of roles and duties. Two Canadian human resources in libraries found strong overlap between professional librarian tasks and library paraprofessionals, particularly with regards to public service work (8Rs Research Team, 2005; DeLong, et al., 2015). The most recent report indicated that the overlap will increase and the trend for library paraprofessionals to perform the roles traditionally reserved for librarians will continue (DeLong, et al., 2015). Many of the researchers emphasized the need for clarity of responsibilities and a lessening of ambiguity in paraprofessional roles (Cox & Myers, 2010; Gremmels, 2013; James, et al., 2015; Oberg, 1992; Younger, 1996; Zhu, 2012). However, the findings in this research do not indicate that paraprofessionals experience the ambiguity that these researchers describe. None of the participants talk about their work in terms of confusion and uncertainty in their role. In contrast, they demonstrate a certainty about their position and status, but instead, express frustration over limitations to what they can do because of their paraprofessional status. As described earlier, when the individual is not able to be an active role player in the construction of their work identity through the ability to direct their own work, their work ceases to carry meaning and they lose their sense of value (Crafford, et al., 2015).



A third way in which roles and responsibilities can influence work identity is sometimes positive and sometimes negative; it is through the value their employer and others place upon the work they do. Those who felt the roles they performed were valued by the organization also were secure, and therefore developed a strong identification with their work and also with their organization (for example, Diana). Conversely, those who felt the roles they performed were not valued by the organization did not feel secure (for example, Lisa). This can produce a sense of disengagement with work and also affect job performance (de Braine & Roodt, 2015).

The findings from this study demonstrate that these paraprofessionals' engagement with their roles and responsibilities have a largely positive influence on the construction of their work identity. In order for this to be maintained, paraprofessional required work that they viewed as meaningful and challenging. They want to be active role players in the construction of their daily work and they want that work to be recognized and valued by others. Misconceptions about their capabilities can create instability in their work identity. There is a tension between role clarity and social perception that has been addressed by work identity literature but not discussed within the context of library and information science careers. As a result, the library community seems behind in terms of understanding and appreciating the work and contributions of library paraprofessionals.

## **Summary**

This discussion was organized into three sections: Personal Influences, Work Relationships, and Work Activities. All of these factors were shown to positively influence work identity in the paraprofessional, suggesting that a library paraprofessional career can provide a sense of value, purpose and belonging. However, certain tensions

exist that need to be addressed and rectified in order for library paraprofessionals to fully realize their potential.

The next and final chapter will highlight the implications of this study for both library paraprofessionals and the library industry as a whole. It will conclude by suggesting ways in which paraprofessionals may move forward in constructing a strong work identity and will offer advice to the library community as to how to support and build a promising future for all library workers.

## Chapter Nine: Implications and Conclusion

### *A Letter to the Library Technicians in the Class of 2018:*

*Congratulations! You are about to embark on a career that has been two years in the making. I have gathered advice from library technicians who have worked in libraries from two years to thirty-five years. Their work environments range from rural public libraries to high school libraries to large university libraries. Their job titles are as diverse as their work environments: for example, library assistant, learning commons facilitator, cataloguer, and assistant manager. They wish to give back, to share what they have learned over their careers in order to help create an even better workplace for the next generation of library technicians. First, let's recap the three most common library environments where library technicians work and what those environments have to offer.*

*If you are interested in working in a public library, you are in for a rewarding and challenging career. Public libraries are the centre of the community; society's 'third place' after home and work. You can expect everything and anything to happen if you are to work at a public library. Working in public service, you will be involved in programs, services, and making connections with people. Working in technical services, you will work with a team to bring items into the hands of the public. Here in Alberta, both Calgary and Edmonton are renovating their central branch libraries, which are models of the new millennium of libraries. Once renovated, they will be dynamic community hubs in the centre of downtown. They will be aesthetically pleasing spaces with an abundance of natural light and open spaces. They will contain large children's spaces, state of the art Makerspaces, high tech theatres, and Edmonton's library will house a larger than life interaction simulation wall. But ... there will still be books and people and reference questions and cataloguing. This is the future of public libraries and as a technician, you will be involved in the community like you never imagined.*

*There might be a chance that you will work for a regional library system. This is a career where your attention to detail and problem-solving skills are put to good use: working with materials, creating records, helping member library staff, and being a part of a large team working together for the good of local, rural libraries. You might work in isolation some days, but you are always working with the same purpose as anyone else in*

*public libraries - to make information available to the community.*

*If you are interested in starting your career in an academic library, you will be challenged and stimulated by a lot of front desk customer service and exciting project opportunities. Much like the public library, the academic library is about services and meaningful connections with its community of users. The digital shift is perhaps no more obvious than in the academic library. Yes, you will still work with the traditional - encyclopedias, newspapers on microfilm, old manuscripts, music scores, and proceedings from the House of Commons in 1912. But you will also need to be well versed in new terminology: datasets, digital artefacts, technology-centered ways of learning, and open service models like roving reference. You need to know your technology, because you will be asked to help with it, both in front and behind the scenes on a daily basis. Likely, you are working closely with a team of people - librarians, technicians, clerks - and might have the opportunity to work in a specialized area such as special collections or digital initiatives, that speak to your strengths and interests.*

*For those of you interested in school libraries, you are going to find the work as fulfilling as it could possibly be. School libraries are about space and relationships. It is no longer a detention centre or where the 'hush' librarian resides. It has been redefined as the place for discovery, learning, and creation. The learning commons is flexible, playful, and interactive. You have the opportunity to change a child's life because you might be the only person, the only place, where they can come and not feel judged. Be prepared to work by yourself or be making decisions on your own. While there is tremendous agency that comes with this, there can also be a sense of isolation. You need to work hard at communication, so you are known as a vital part of the school community.*

*You might think you know exactly which of those environments you wish to work in. Or, you may have not yet decided, or you might be open to try anything. No matter where you end up, there are some enduring truths that current library technicians would like you to know. Here is their advice:*

***Remember what drew you to libraries in the first place***

*Many of you are avid readers and love the environment of libraries. Most of you have expressed interest in working with people and performing a helping role. You want to make a difference to people's lives and in the community.*

*Veronica (school library, 5 years in libraries): Veronica followed her heart after*

*trying different careers; she finally found her place in libraries. She said “I’ve always loved books. I love being in a library environment. It was a perfect fit for me because I love the customer service and I get to be around books all day!”*

*Breanna (academic library, 5 years in libraries): People are interesting! You will learn from them and with them. Breanna is in her dream job because she “gets to go to work and hear interesting people and learn new things every day.” Expect, and believe that this will happen.*

### ***Keep your options (and your heart) open***

*Reality check: you may not get into the library environment you always thought you wanted to work in. Your job will constantly be evolving and changing. The opportunities are there! You may start out in a simple, support staff role, but it won’t end there.*

*Jason (public library, cataloguer for 8 years): Jason liked cataloguing enough during school but didn’t think he’d end up as a manager of a cataloguing unit. His advice is “don’t get too caught up in your focus of what you want to do but look at the big picture ... sometimes when you try something you end up enjoying it more than you realize.” Be open to whatever opportunities might come your way.*

*Margaret (academic library, 25 years in libraries): Margaret has supervised numerous practicum students, worked alongside many library technicians, and has been heavily involved in library association work, getting to know a lot of people. She says in your first job, “learn as much as you can but know that it’s going to change. And be willing to do anything, try anything.” Following this advice has given Margaret a long and rewarding career.*

### ***Look deeper***

*There is always deeper meaning to your work than just the routine day to day. If you focus on the bigger picture of what you are contributing, it will bring meaning and purpose to your life. Work and ‘who you are’ are closely linked.*

*Melissa (public library, 25 years in libraries): Always remember your purpose. She works as an assistant manager but still, the best part of her job is working with people. She loves creating an environment where “kids feel comfortable coming into the library knowing that they’re safe here.” Do not forget that connections with people can bring the most meaning to your work.*

*Susan (regional library system, 9 years as a cataloguer): Cataloguing has a deeper purpose, too. She reminds you that “technical services make the wheels go round! It’s at the heart because we’re the ones granting access to the books. It’s very vital.” You can find meaningful work in many different library environments.*

***Be aware of, and fight the misconceptions***

*You are going to hear this time and time again: the library is dying. The library is nothing but a dusty storehouse of books. Working in a library is quiet, easy work. None of that is true. Even if you are assigned a traditional role in a pretty traditional library, be an active player in the creation of your own identity, and in your library’s identity. Don’t be confined by what tradition says you should be. Don’t be limited by anyone, or anything.*

*Jacqueline (school library, 20 years in libraries): Her school library looks nothing like the school library of the past. “There’s music going in the background, there’s kids everywhere, there might be one playing cards, a kid on the computer, there’s some reading ... if all it is, is a quiet place where you’re signing out books, anyone can do that, right? But people come into my library and go, oh!”*

*Kendra (public library, 5 years in libraries): Know that the public library is not a chill environment. At her public library, she deals with “everything from irate people, to pepper spray and dealing with medical emergencies and overdoses and mental health issues and people who just need someone to talk to....” She challenges you to “consider the emotional labour that you’re willing to put into your job and into the communities that they’re going to be a part of.” The reward can be huge.*

***Let divisions be a footnote***

*Sometimes you might hear that there are things you can’t do because you are a library technician, not a librarian. Sometimes the library organization might have a strict hierarchy where equitable treatment doesn’t seem to exist. Just know this: mostly, it’s history we are hearing and feeling. Most library workplaces do not operate under this assumption. And a hierarchical work environment need not always limit what your valued contribution is. Let any divisions be a footnote in your experience, not the main story. Do not let it rule your work or your perception of your work.*

*Angela (regional library system, 10 years in libraries): We’re all in this for the same reason. Angela says to remember, these are your people! She says everyone can*

*come together in a collaborative way if we approach our work remembering that everyone - librarians, library technicians, administration - wants to “help people, make a difference in some way, shape or form.”*

*Lisa (academic library, 25 years in libraries): Focusing on divisions can inhibit your nature desire to work well with others. Lisa reassures you that “people that work in libraries are really good people, and they can work together really well when those divisions don’t exist”. Focus on your role as part a team, not as a particular class or division.*

### ***Stay connected***

*Nothing is more important to these experienced library technicians than having good relationships with the people they work with. All of them would say, devote time and energy to developing those relationships, and indeed, friendships.*

*Rachel (academic library, 5 years in libraries): Be a part of the conversation! Enjoy the library workplace, where people really do respect each other’s opinions, no matter their role. She says, “just knowing great people that have similar passions to me is kind of heart-warming, so working with those people is wonderful”.*

*Brenda (school library, 20 years in libraries): Brenda says to be patient; it took her a while for teachers to trust that she is “a resource for them, and I’m not there to inhibit their job, I’m there to help their job.” The reward will pay off once those connections are made.*

*As you enter into this career, remember these words of wisdom from experienced library technicians. They have been where you are and know the uncertainty and trepidation that comes with beginning this new chapter in your life. Heed their advice, stay positive and hopeful, and give back to the profession by offering up your encouragement and guidance to those who come after you. Remember that this career can offer a sense of belonging and purpose, and you can become a valued, contributing member of a library work environment. You will be hard pressed to find a more rewarding career.*

*Norene Erickson, Assistant Professor*

This chapter began with letter from me, an Assistant Professor in a library paraprofessional program, which contains nuggets of wisdom from the twenty-six participants of this study, to new graduates of a library technician program. Next I will present the implications for this study and offer suggestions as to where to go from here both practically and theoretically. The chapter will conclude with some final thoughts regarding work identity in library paraprofessionals and thoughts on the future of library paraprofessionals.

This study has presented ways in which work identity is shaped by various factors in a library paraprofessional's life; notably, by post-secondary experiences, by relationships at work, and by the roles and responsibilities taken on in the workplace. I used case study methodology, which allowed for a holistic exploration into the world of the library paraprofessional in three environments: school, academic and public libraries. This methodology allowed me to investigate the complex world of library work with a goal to help illuminate the factors that shape work identity in library paraprofessionals. I drew upon the conceptual foundations of work identity along with social identity theory. Social identity theory is arguably the prominent theory that describes group dynamics and behaviour, particularly in organizational studies (Haslam, 2004) and is useful for this study because of the highly relational and social context in which library paraprofessionals work. The discussion organized the findings into three sections: personal influences, work relationships and work activities. The findings indicated that all of these factors positively influenced work identity in the paraprofessional, suggesting that a library paraprofessional career has the capacity to provide a sense of value, purpose and belonging in the individual. However, certain tensions need to be addressed and rectified in order for library paraprofessionals to fully realize their potential.



It is important to reiterate that work identity is an ongoing negotiation within the self. It is not a static entity. It is not separate *from* the individual, it is created *by* the individual. Work identities “do not just happen but can be consciously and purposefully developed by an individual” (Roodt, Jansen, & Crous, 2015, p. 14). While one may lack control over certain components of one’s work, conscious decisions can be made as to who one ideally would like to be in order to develop and maintain a strong work identity and positive sense of self (Roodt, et al., 2015). Because work identity is a dynamic, negotiated process it is helpful to listen to how others have managed their own work identity in order to learn how to strengthen our own. The twenty-six participants in this study had much to say about what shaped their work identity, although they did not even know they were talking about “identity”. They merely shared their experiences. Yet in that process, I gleaned bits of wisdom on what a strong work identity looks like and how it is formed. I can start to envision what a library paraprofessional, with a strong sense of value, purpose and belonging in the workplace might look like and how they came to be that way.

### **Theoretical Contributions and Implications**

This chapter will now turn to the implications of this study for libraries and offer suggestions as to what direction we go from here both practically and theoretically. The implications will be considered within the context of the three research sub-questions: implications for post-secondary programs, implications for work relationships, and implications for work roles and responsibilities.

#### **Implications for research and practice in post-secondary programs.**

##### ***Entry into the career.***

In this study it was discovered that there were common motivators that brought

individuals to a library paraprofessional program: a personal interest in books, reading, and a positive, personal history with libraries were common reasons mentioned. It was also learned that individuals entering the program were looking for a career that fit personal and practical life requirements, such as work hours conducive to family life. More research would be beneficial to determine what additional factors draw an individual to a library paraprofessional career. This would assist library paraprofessional programs in recruitment and promotion initiatives.

While some studies have been conducted on motivators for people to choose the graduate library program route (Carroll & Murray, 2010; Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, Vassilakaki, & Tsatsaroni, 2015), only a small amount of research touches on how library paraprofessionals select their profession. There is an equal absence of research looking at library paraprofessional experiences during the diploma education and how that may inform and influence their perspectives of the career. Further research needs to investigate not only the motivators that draw library paraprofessionals to this career, but also their diploma education experiences. This would help to inform library paraprofessional program institutions and educators with recruitment strategies and ways to connect those with certain interests and aptitudes to this career. It would also help educators to better understand the personal factors that are prominent with library paraprofessional students and the specific passions that drew them to library work; for example, the desire to help people. This may help to inform curriculum, as educators can focus on particular passions, interests, and aptitudes to help motivate and validate ‘who they are’ as library paraprofessionals. This validation is critical for the formation of a strong work identity established from an active expression of individual agency and a sense of uniqueness and purpose in the workplace (Crafford et al., 2011). It is a

shortcoming that research has centered on motivators attributed to librarianship, but not also explored paraprofessional work. Given that both careers work in the same environments, with a growing area of task overlap (Cox & Myers, 2010; Dinkins & Ryan, 2010; Erb & Erb, 2015; Gremmels, 2013; Zhu, 2012) further studies should be conducted that encompass all library workers pursuing diploma or degree library education.

Special attention should be paid to the persistent stereotypes of library work. Some of what was discovered in this study, and in previous studies (Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, et al., 2015) shows that a connection with books and reading is an enduring characteristic of one who is interested in library work. Although this seems to play into the stereotype of the “bookworm” librarian, there is opportunity for a reimagining that acknowledges the other common attractions such as the interest in helping people, and connection to the nature of the work itself (practical, hands-on, and problem-solving work characteristics). Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, et al. (2015), in their systematic review, showed that these motivators for drawing an individual into a graduate-level library career are all cited fairly equally in the literature. This current study’s findings are very similar. Marketing strategies for library paraprofessional programs should embrace these common interests that draw an individual to this career, but in conjunction with the emphasis on the people aspect of the work. As the participants showed, heavy involvement in working with people both other library workers and with customers is a common feature of almost every library work environment and library position. Pulling together all of these passions in marketing and promotions initiatives will help to portray a more realistic picture of what library paraprofessional work is about.

It is also important that library and information science researchers and library

organization administrators and managers be cognizant that librarianship is a gendered profession that has not entirely shaken the social and cultural norms of mid-century that librarianship is a feminine pursuit. Women were considered best suited for this profession because of their seeming moral and socially situated characteristics that lent themselves well to the nurturing roles that librarianship assumed (Downey, 2010; Stauffer, 2014). Researchers must be careful not to generalize the profession (both librarianship and by extension—paraprofessional careers) and not be bounded by the negative, cultural stereotypes that are present in terms of who is best suited for this type of work. Based on the research surrounding the motivations to enter these careers, it appears some stereotypical reasons (and gendered reasons) persist; there is value in working towards attracting a greater spectrum of competencies and interests—computer technology being one of them—that broadens the nature of library work and how it is perceived. It is not argued here that these social and cultural norms of gendered work are necessarily harmful to both librarianship and library paraprofessional work, but that they can inhibit how people perceive library work and affect (and possibly limit) who enters into this career.

Further questions arose in this study that would be of interest to pursue in future studies. One question is, what motivates individuals to choose a library paraprofessional career as a second career, or later in life? Another question to be explored in further studies is a more thorough examination of why a paraprofessional education is chosen over a graduate-level library education, and perhaps more importantly—what prevents or encourages a library paraprofessional from continuing their education and pursuing a graduate-level library education after working as a paraprofessional. All of these questions, if explored, could help library educators in developing recruitment practices

that not only assist the individual programs with attracting the right candidates, but also can increase the knowledge and connections between the two primary library education paths. This would perhaps help to lessen the delineation between the two routes and provide more seamless opportunities for one to continue their education should they choose to do so.

As previously mentioned in this study, what is most unsettling is the nebulous nature of what constitutes a paraprofessional. There is a pattern of negative discourse that comes from these educational distinctions, contributing to (or perhaps a result of) the lack of a clear definition for the library paraprofessional. We may wish to work towards better clarity of what constitutes a “library paraprofessional” and the different motivators that draw people to a paraprofessional or a professional librarian career choice. The dynamic interplay between motivators, conventional images of the career, organizational structures, and school experiences is yet to be investigated.

### ***Changes to library paraprofessional training and preparation.***

The findings from this research showed there is disconnect between the skills-based approach to library paraprofessional education and the more complex skill set expressed by paraprofessionals. The vocational, skills-based education approach that dominated the 20th century in North American library paraprofessional schools (Davidson-Arnott & Kay, 1998; Howarth, 1998; Moriarity, 1982) needs to switch to a knowledge-based approach in order to address the more complex roles taken on by paraprofessionals. There is also a need to acknowledge the depth of personal attributes and qualities that library paraprofessionals bring to the field. Paraprofessionals, in their more complex roles, require critical thinking skill development, or, the development of “practical reason [and] the ability to cope with change, to exercise judgment, to problem-

solve effectively, to understand their activities within the wider contexts of the LIS profession and communities served” (Jacobs & Raju, 2008, p. 11). There is strong evidence from my study that library paraprofessionals are taking on more complex duties. It correlates with previous studies that reported strong overlap between professional librarian tasks and library paraprofessionals, particularly with regards to public service work (8Rs Research Team, 2005; DeLong, et al., 2015). The most recent human resources report indicated that role overlap continues to increase, and the trend of library paraprofessionals performing what was traditionally librarian roles, will also continue (DeLong, et al., 2015).

The participants in this study, if representative of library paraprofessionals across the spectrum of library environments, are poised to greatly benefit from a general education, such as that received by a professional librarian in their undergraduate preparation. They require the intellectual preparation similar to that attained in degree-level programs in order to better match library workplace demands, be able to fully appreciate the “big picture” (Jason), and to be prepared for the “variety of options” (Nicole) expressed by many participants.

Previous research, together with the findings in this study, suggest there are growing numbers of library paraprofessionals who hold managerial or administrative roles (DeLong, et al., 2015) requiring a step-up in the training and preparation of library paraprofessionals. It is suggested that recommendations from the 8R’s Research Team (2005), from their study on the future of human resources in Canadian libraries, be followed by recognizing the number of paraprofessionals who are involved in managerial or administrative work, and to provide the background and training for potentially taking on these roles. Furthermore, the 8Rs Research Team, in a specific study on the training

gaps between librarians and library technicians (2006), suggested that library paraprofessional curriculum should reflect a balance between “general, IT, public service and communication skills course offerings” (p. 108). This is an improvement in terms of recognizing complexities of library paraprofessional work since Davidson-Arnott and Kay (1998) wrote of the value in maintaining a skills-based education. The findings in the current study indicate that educating to a higher skill set is not only desired but also essential, particularly in areas of public service and communication skills. It is suggested that library paraprofessionals schools continue to focus efforts on public service and communication skill training, building a deeper commitment, awareness and appreciation for the value of connections with customers and other library staff.

***Specific training emphasis.***

Beyond the argument to create a more knowledge-based approach to library paraprofessional education, this study has brought into the light specific areas that might require greater emphasis in the curriculum.

***The people-aspect of the work.***

As the participants showed, heavy involvement in working with people, both with other library workers and with customers, is a common feature of almost every library work environment and library position. Role overlap, extensively reported in the literature, includes greater public service involvement for library paraprofessionals (8Rs Research Team, 2005; DeLong, et al., 2015; James, Shamchuk, & Koch, 2015) as well as greater negotiation of duties between library paraprofessionals and other library workers, notably professional librarians. While the research shows there is already a significant amount of attention paid to reference and information services in library paraprofessional programs in Canada, emphasis is typically on skill development rather than on

philosophical orientation towards service as a greater public good (Erickson & Shamchuk, 2017). Library paraprofessional educational programs should focus on service as a core value; as was discovered, this is a major part of the library paraprofessional's daily work. Educational programs should capitalize on the prospective student's desire to make meaningful connections with the library community in school, academic, and public libraries and contribute to the betterment of that community. This would allow library paraprofessional programs to focus on "personal competencies rather than strictly applied skills" (8Rs Research Team, 2006, p. 108) previously argued as the essential direction needed in order for the paraprofessional to adjust to the increasing complexity of their roles (Erickson & Shamchuk, 2017).

*The library environment.*

Participants in this study, for the most part, choose specific library environments that suit their personal interests and attributes. Public and school library participants in this study were drawn to working with people. Public library participants experienced customer service as one of the most enjoyable things they did at work, and school library participants desired a library job that gave them the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of children and young adults. Academic library participants' love for teaching and learning, and their commitment to helping students succeed was the most enjoyable aspect of their work. Those in technical services viewed their contribution as significant to providing access to information for the customer.

It would benefit those in the career if educational programs emphasized the differences and uniqueness of each library environment along with type of positions available to graduates, so as to match core interests and aptitudes of the paraprofessional student. This can assist students in deciding which environment is best suited for them



and in which they are most likely to attain high levels of job satisfaction and growth. It is known that the nature of the work itself (i.e., what actually one is involved with on a daily basis) is a reason for choosing a career in librarianship (Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, et al., 2015) and based on the findings of this study it could also apply to library paraprofessionals. It would benefit the library work environment if library paraprofessional schools could offer as much specific information as possible on each unique work environment, connecting personal interests, attributes, and desires with the type of work available in each sector, so the student could make an informed choice upon graduation as to which library environment in which they wish to be situated. The purpose is not to pigeonhole a library paraprofessional into one particular line of work or suggest that there might not be multiple environments suited to an individual; but merely to provide enough information so as to make an informed and realistic decision on what work environment might provide the best opportunity for a high level of job satisfaction and lifestyle suitability.

***Core values for library paraprofessionals.***

The time may have come for the American Library Association amongst other library associations, organizations and researchers to recognize that core values are not exclusive to professional librarians. It was argued in the previous chapter that the connections between library paraprofessionals' engagement with their work in this study and core values presented by various library associations is very strong. A correlation was given between the American Library Association's (ALA) core values of librarianship (2004) and participants' engagement with these core values through their expressions of how they approach their work. It is evident that these library paraprofessionals, while perhaps not aware they are speaking to 'core values', are

engaged in enacting these values during the course of their work. Gorman (2015) makes no specific mention of library paraprofessionals but does sometimes include ‘library workers’ in his discussion of the eight core values of librarianship. In the literature, it is not as much a denial that core values apply to library paraprofessionals but more an exclusion. I recommend, based on the findings from this study, that library paraprofessional education provide more focus surrounding these recognized core values that influence and shape the way libraries and all library staff approach their work. Library paraprofessionals, as observed in this study, already go about their work as though shaped by core values. Perhaps some have been exposed to these concepts in their library education, or in training at work, or through discussions and observations with coworkers. The participants in this study appear to be philosophically rooted to core values already, but library paraprofessionals would benefit from a stronger, more formalized introduction to core values such as those presented by the American Library Association or scholars such as Michael Gorman. Not only will their approach to work be influenced and strengthened by these foundational principles, but also the library community will benefit if it is acknowledged, in a more overt way, that core values apply as much to library paraprofessionals as they do professional librarians.

### **Implications for research and practice on relationships at work.**

#### ***The professional/nonprofessional divide.***

It is not the intent of this study to claim that library paraprofessionals warrant professional status. Indeed, professionalism is a contentious topic within librarianship and whether or not librarians may lay claim to the status of ‘professional’ is argued in both directions (Crowley, 2012; Litwin, 2009; Nettlefold, 1989; Seminelli, 2016). Much like Lively’s (2001) study of paralegals, where the term ‘professional’, to those

individuals, was about moral worth and not occupational standing, the library paraprofessionals in this study seek primarily to have their contributions recognized and respected. A desire to be one and the same as librarians in terms of occupational status does not appear to exist. However, there is strong evidence that library paraprofessionals want to be active role players in the construction of their daily work and they want that work to be recognized and valued by others.

Literature on paraprofessionals and their roles and relationships with professional librarians was at its height in the 1980s and 1990s. This is when the majority of research was conducted, likely in response to technological changes that greatly affected work tasks and how work was divided in libraries. During those decades and in the time since, there are only a few studies that consider the perspective of the library paraprofessional as to their work and relationship status vis a vis professional librarians (see, for example, Fragola, 2009; Hill, 2014; James, Shamchuk, & Koch, 2015). Many articles make assumptions on what library paraprofessionals' motives are and where paraprofessionals see themselves fitting into the library workplace (see, for example, Froehlich, 1998; Litwin, 2009). The majority of the research, however, is centered on the blurring of roles between library paraprofessionals and professional librarians. The gist of most articles is demonstrated by Wilson and Hermanson (1998) where they state, regarding the after effects of role blurring, that the library workplace has not yet established certainty as to where librarianship is going, in lieu of traditional tasks now undertaken by paraprofessionals.

There are a couple of issues with the focus during this time; one is the preoccupation with the need to protect "professionalism" in the face of the growing number of library paraprofessionals "taking over" professional roles. Tensions built

between both categories of workers as a perceived distrust arose. The heightened status and responsibilities of paraprofessionals, as they work alongside professionals, downgraded the professional status of the librarian in the eyes of the public (Froehlich, 1998). There is a lack of investigation on whether this is a consequence that is assumed or is a reality, or how widespread it might have been. It seems to have done nothing but increase unnecessary tension between the two categories of workers, without proof that harm has been done by a blurring of roles and responsibilities. Could the mere suggestion of tension have created tension? What if tension was heightened as a result of stirring the embers? In this current study, the participants are aware that tension sometimes does exist, and there is sometimes a devaluing of their contributions, but whether or not this causes a downgrade of professional status is a claim not confidently proven in any literature in the past few decades.

The second issue surrounds persistent attempts to clarify roles (see, for example Cox & Myers, 2010; Han & Chaudhry, 2000; Younger, 1996) and a seeming preoccupation with elucidating what it means to be a professional (see, for example, Johnson, 1991; Nettlefold, 1989). There is a substantive amount of literature on what constitutes ‘professional’ work, who is doing it, how much of it is being taken over by the library paraprofessional, and what that means for the professional librarian (see for example, Crowley, 2012; Russell, 1985). The problem is librarians, who are writing the articles on professionalism, are more preoccupied with themselves and their status as a professional, than they are concerned for the library workplace as a whole. After all there is little evidence that library paraprofessionals are attempting to claim professional status. The current study’s participants requested equitable treatment and consideration, but not a change of status. Authors such as Drabinski (2016) are breaking new ground by

expressing professionalism in a broader sense; while recognizing the professional status applicable to librarians, Drabinski also acknowledges other contributors who would benefit from being a part of the conversation. Designating core values and professionalism to librarians alone is both exclusionary and inequitable, and as Drabinski (2016) argues, “rather than simply valuing a category of worker [that is, librarians], the [library] field might usefully articulate for itself what we value when we value Professionalism” (p. 614). Further, in the current study, there is little evidence that role clarity is a concern or cause for confusion at least amongst library paraprofessionals.

With both of these issues—a preoccupation with paraprofessional claims to professionalism, and role clarity and professional definitions—the researchers paid little attention to the lived experiences of these workers, particularly of the library paraprofessional, which may help to provide clearer understandings as to what true issues exist. Studying the lived experiences—listening to the library paraprofessionals themselves might provide a more certainty as to what issues may exist that inhibit work relationships. It is critical that insights from these groups are framed as conversations within a participatory atmosphere, as opposed to a speaking out as to what is lacking for each “profession”. Studies such as the current one, where identity is investigated within the context of personal experiences, relationships, and roles and responsibilities, would help to further understand the needs of all workers in libraries and would help workers, particularly library paraprofessionals, to better answer the question, “who am I at work?” with self-assurance and pride in their contributions.

***Emphasize relationship development.***

Relationships, or social group influences, have a substantial impact on work identity in library paraprofessionals. Theorists maintain that individuals require a

connectedness to others at work; their identity is strongest when they maintain strong social connections (Swann, Johnson, & Bosson, 2009). Participants in this study however, who were disconnected from others in the workplace, felt undervalued. It is imperative, for the development of strong work identity and therefore productive, satisfied workers, that relationship issues be addressed. We can start with the knowledge that library paraprofessionals think in terms of being a part of a team rather than thinking purely as individuals. We also know that their social group salience is threatened by a divided or inferior relationship to others in the group. The participants in this study sometimes sensed an exclusionary attitude among professional librarians and believed they were also excluded from performing tasks they were willing and capable of doing. Library workplaces need to capitalize on the fact that paraprofessionals have a strong desire to be connected to the library team as a whole. Inclusion in meetings, in decisions regarding library operations, programs, or services, in social events, and in regular day-to-day verbal and written correspondence, can go a long way in eliminating divisions, inferiority, and disconnectedness.

Previous research may have over exaggerated the tensions between library paraprofessionals and professional librarians to the point of creating more tension and more division by blaming one side or the other. Case in point is Litwin's (2009) article, where the threat of deprofessionalization on the professional librarian is blamed in part on paraprofessionals taking over duties that previously were under the jurisdiction of professional work (Seminelli, 2016). The American Library Association, what should be a staunch supporter of all library workers, fell short in not providing the resources necessary to support both paraprofessional and professional education (Crowley, 2012). Somewhere along the way, both the ALA and the library research community fell short

of supporting the fundamental purpose of a library, access to information as a basic human right, and arguably was caught up in the capitalist agenda to monetize information (hence hiring cheaper staff, for example, to save money and produce a more “profitable” consumer good). As Stevenson (2011) argues, there is tension between the traditional function of the library as a social good and those tendencies to commodify information and services. This has no doubt had profound effects on educational practices, hiring procedures, the development of a hierarchical structure that commodifies workers, and the strategic planning process of libraries (Quinn & Bates, 2017; Stevenson, 2011). While tension between library paraprofessionals and librarians may have been over exaggerated, they have undeniably developed as a result of the lack of support from major library associations and from management and administrative practices.

Fragola (2009) and Hill (2014) are the only studies located by this researcher on the subject of in-group bias and which focused exclusively on the relationship between library paraprofessionals and professional librarians. Both are Australian studies of which there are correlations to the Canadian environment; nonetheless, a clearer understanding of the historic and contemporary views on the relationship between these two groups as they apply to Canada, is a necessity. The current study showed that while paraprofessionals might have a strong sense of team comradery with librarians and other library workers, they might also feel divided from the team. The library workplace would benefit greatly from more studies that closely examine how these social groups form and how they can be strengthened.

#### **Implications for research and practice on roles and responsibilities.**

*Allow opportunities to grow and contribute meaningfully at work.*

This is not the first study to recognize that people are most satisfied and have a stronger sense of purpose and belonging when they are able to make independent decisions and provide meaningful contributions at work. In library and information science research, the 8Rs Research Team (2005) found the most important factor for job satisfaction amongst librarians and library paraprofessionals was to be respected by their superiors and have the opportunity to grow and acquire new skills at work. In a more recent study, researchers continued to urge library organizations to consider realigning positions “that are challenging for paraprofessionals and professionals alike and acknowledge their distinct but complementary skills sets” (DeLong et al., 2015, p. 77). The current study’s findings affirm these suggestions.

There is some discontent as paraprofessionals are still assigned traditional roles but at the same time are assuming more complex tasks at work that allow for greater agency. The historical impact is still experienced today by library paraprofessionals. We see ample evidence in this particular study. As noted in Chapter Five, this is particularly true for school library paraprofessionals who, usually on their own, must be assertive in proving their worth and value. It is also an issue in public and academic library environments. For example, Jason, in his role as manager of a technical services department in a public library, said, “I think the library tech diploma is worth a lot more than they give it credit for in terms of what we learn and what we do.” Lisa, in her role as a technical services supervisor in an academic library, gave advice that holds true here: “Stop pigeonholing and let people express their natural talents, and allow them to explore their natural talents and stop putting a layer that says you can’t...”.

We know from work identity theorists that having the opportunity to express one’s opinion and to have that opinion validated is a significant motivator to perform



better and can increase one's self-esteem at the same time (Crafford, et al., 2015). Work identity theorists refer to it as individual agency. Having individual agency is the ability to express uniqueness, which in turn shapes personal identity and will "affect motivation and drive, self-esteem and people's concept of work" (Crafford, et al, 2015, p. 63). Much of the work identity research is focused on creating a stronger work identity in the hopes of creating higher levels of job satisfaction and more productive workers, leading to greater success for the organization. The biggest contribution that work identity theorists make, in my eyes, is that while organizational profits and success are often the motivation behind attempts to strengthen work identity, work identity theorists recognize that the entire organization benefits when all workers have a strong sense of belonging, purpose, and feel valued at work. Many work identity researchers are human resource or organizational behaviourist researchers and are earnest in their pursuit of understanding people's behaviour at work and how to make it a more satisfying and productive workplace. Saayman and Crafford (2011), in their investigation of employees of a South African manufacturing company, urges companies to allow for individual agency, or the ability for workers to have a say in how work is performed and indeed in the organization's direction as a whole. The researchers discovered through their study that people need recognition. They need feedback, and they need opportunities to continue learning. Workers need to feel valued in order for them to be completely engaged in their work. Lessons can be learned from other organizational studies on both for-profit and non-profit organizations, in how they listen to personal and social identity needs of workers and how it can transform the workplace. Further research within library and information studies, particularly surrounding library paraprofessionals, is necessary in order to identify what identity tensions may be prohibiting these workers from

establishing a stronger work identity.

In addition, there is a need to pay more attention to those library paraprofessionals who hold managerial or administrative roles. Research previous to the current study suggested, “grooming efforts for leadership/management should be taking place at all levels of the library organization, including new entrants (both professionals and paraprofessionals)” (8Rs Research Team, 2005, p. 16). After listening to those participants in managerial or administrative positions, I agree that it is time for library organizations to focus on the development of leadership and management skills in library paraprofessionals.

***Focus on skills, not job title.***

Both previous studies and the current study have identified a blurring of responsibilities and confusion over what a paraprofessional does and how this is distinguished from professional work. Earlier in this chapter, the impact on relationships was examined. Here, we look to examine impact on roles.

We see some evidence in this study that library paraprofessionals sense the ambiguity of their place in the library work environment. This has to do in part with the increased complexity of paraprofessional work and the breadth of job titles and roles that all fall under the umbrella of “library paraprofessional”. What does it really mean to be a library paraprofessional and what work do you do? Participants in this study range from two years of experience to over thirty years of experience, and in significantly different work environments. Yet all fall under the category of library paraprofessional when we look at the literature or within discourse from library associations. In the library workplace, the terms are as diverse as the jobs themselves and as noted in previous chapters, the common identifying title in Canada is “library technician”.

Zhu's (2012) suggestion, also mentioned by some participants in this study, is for a re-examination of workplace roles and even a dissolution of the paraprofessional/professional divide in terms of workplace responsibilities, instead focusing on the development of necessary skills regardless of title. Cox and Myers (2010) recommended better articulation of responsibilities to avoid role confusion, but based on this study's findings, this does not address the core issue which is not so much role confusion, but role restriction. Zhu's offer of erasing divides while appealing on many levels, is likely not feasible. It is also not necessarily the right solution, given that the majority of library paraprofessionals do perform different work than their professional librarian coworkers.

The title, library paraprofessional, although useful as an umbrella term for research, cannot be viewed as a catchall phrase for all that these workers do. Johnson's advice, although dated, suggests that professional and paraprofessionals positions "cannot be seen as floating points on the same continuum" (Johnson, 1991, p. 97) and that the work they do differs both in authority and scope of responsibility. This researcher begs to differ slightly. Perhaps they *are* floating points on the same continuum, as we see new roles emerge and greater complexity to paraprofessional work. This is not to say they are all one and the same, but perhaps strong dividing lines are not necessary between the categories of workers. This is also not to say that everyone, professional librarians or library paraprofessionals are all the same in terms of roles and responsibilities. We need to recognize the unique contribution of *both* the professional librarian and the library paraprofessional while at the same time, focus on development of the unique skills of any library worker, regardless of title. From a work identity perspective, this approach provides the opportunity to acknowledge the uniqueness of a library paraprofessional.

The ability to express this uniqueness, as we have seen from participants in this study, coupled with a sense of belonging (established by knowing they are contributing members of the organization or team), can reduce tension in the workplace, increase clarity of purpose and contribution, and therefore create a strong work identity (Crafford, et al., 2015).

Research on paraprofessionals, both library and otherwise, have suggested a more democratic approach to professional development and skills training (Downing, Ryndak & Clark, 2000; Edmond & Hayler, 2013; Fragola, 2009). There is an unevenness between librarians and paraprofessionals with regards to professional development opportunities (Neigel, 2016) which further threatens the status of library paraprofessionals and how they believe their work is valued. There is an obvious exclusion of library paraprofessionals from most workplace professional development opportunities, which challenges the perceived status of the paraprofessional, as they struggle for value recognition and compensation (Neigel, 2016). If workplace training could bring together all levels (in particular, paraprofessionals and professional librarians) of workers in libraries, it could help erase or at least minimize the professional/paraprofessional divide, give much needed training to paraprofessionals assuming more complex roles, and create a strong social identity amongst all library employees. It can also give paraprofessionals a higher degree of independence while still being part of an interactive team. A stronger voice from all may provide more explicit structures and expectations of each other's role, while contributing to a more synergetic and collaborative workplace. Another idea that comes from the teaching profession, where it is common for paraprofessionals and teachers to work together, is to provide better training for teachers on how to supervise and manage the work of

paraprofessionals in the workforce. The library education community may wish to consider this within the graduate-level programs. This would help to build in these professional librarians a greater respect and awareness of the value that paraprofessionals bring to the library workplace.

The bottom line is this. Allow library paraprofessionals to do their work, and then some. Recognize their growing skill set and reward it with greater opportunities to contribute. Worry less about the job title, the moniker “library paraprofessional”, or where to place them on a pay scale and focus more on the unique skill set of each individual and how they can contribute to the organization as a whole. It can be a win-win situation, when agency is given to the paraprofessional yet at the same time a stronger team environment is nurtured, where everyone is treated as a valued, contributing member of the team.

### **Final advice**

As a final consideration, the library community, researchers, and educators would all benefit by looking at the research on other paraprofessional careers for guidance. Studies on similar paraprofessional roles are rich in the areas of education and nursing, in particular. Several enlightening comparisons have been made in this study using literature surrounding other paraprofessional careers. For example, Kirpal (2004), in his study of the profession of nursing, discovered that the employees who adapted best to a fluctuating environment were those who were flexible in redefining work identity as needed. This flexibility could be encouraged and developed by shifting away from specific skill training to a hybrid of both hard and ‘soft’ skills including communication and teamwork aptitudes. Much can be learned from Kirpal’s study that may apply to the library work environment. The library is clearly an ever-changing and dynamic

organization. A library paraprofessional who challenges their traditional role, who pushes boundaries, and who are change agents in how the organization views them, are going to develop a stronger work identity (Kirpal, 2004). The more flexible and open library workers are to changes in their identity, vis a vis their roles, responsibilities and relationships, the stronger the work identity and the stronger the library organization.

Other studies regarding paraprofessional education or nursing careers offer insight into approaches that may help to strengthen work identity. For those environments where a strong identity is threatened because of disassociation from the rest of the working group, researchers suggest emphasizing and focusing on organizational identity, so it becomes synonymous with individual work identity (Thomson, et al., 2018). Other studies bring to light the importance of being deliberate in showing respect and value to paraprofessionals in order to increase job satisfaction (see, for example, Bishop, et al., 2009), and to involve paraprofessionals more overtly in the decision making processes (for example, Gray & Lukyanova, 2017). The value of providing further training and support can significantly impact a paraprofessional's sense of value and position as a contributing member of the team (Downing, et al., 2000; Irvin, Ingram, Huffman, Mason & Wills, 2018). Some researchers suggest broadening the concept of professionalism and creating a notion of "democratic professionalism" (Edmond & Hayler, 2013, p. 219). Just being acknowledged as a valuable and contributing member of a team can have significant, practical implications for the cohesiveness of the group and success of the organization (Fryer, Bellamy, Morgan & Gott, 2016). We can learn a lot by looking to paraprofessional research in other industries.

## **Summary**

This final chapter began with a letter to new library paraprofessionals, from

myself as an Assistant Professor in a two-year library paraprofessional program. In the letter, I took comments from the twenty-six participants of this study and framed it as advice to new graduates of a library paraprofessional program. Then the implications of this study for library workplaces were presented and suggestions were given for moving forward with what we have learned, both practically and theoretically. The chapter will conclude with some final thoughts regarding work identity in library paraprofessionals and what the future might hold.

From this study, we have learned things about work identity. We have become aware that work identity is a negotiated process where an individual makes conscious decisions at work as to what to pursue, how to act, and what to think in order to work towards the type of individual, at work, that they ideally would like to be. We also know that identity itself is a negotiated process; it is an ever-changing self-narrative that is a fluid and continuous process; however, we strive for some sense of consistency and stability in order for an individual to operate at their best (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). The library organization is dynamic, and the work library professionals and paraprofessionals do is constantly fluctuating and adjusting to the needs of society. The workplace operates most optimally when those changes and transitions in the workplace allow the individual to adjust or create new identity characteristics as needed (Crafford, et al., 2015). The stronger the work identity of a library paraprofessional, the better it is for the organization.

A strong work identity is also known to influence job satisfaction, motivation, and an individual's sense of value, belonging and purpose in the workplace (Jansen & Roodt, 2015). This is the ultimate goal of this study: to bring into consciousness the factors that make up a strong work identity; personal influences, relationships, and roles and

responsibilities and help to build that strength of purpose, belonging, and value in a library paraprofessional. The library paraprofessional, if mindful of all the things that can impact work identity, can then make decisions on behaviour, actions and attitude that help to heighten their sense of self and ultimately, feel good about the work they are doing. The stronger the work identity of a library paraprofessional, the more resilient through obstacles that library paraprofessional might be. And in spite of repeated messages that tell us we can't; we have learned that it is fully within our abilities to say, "We can".



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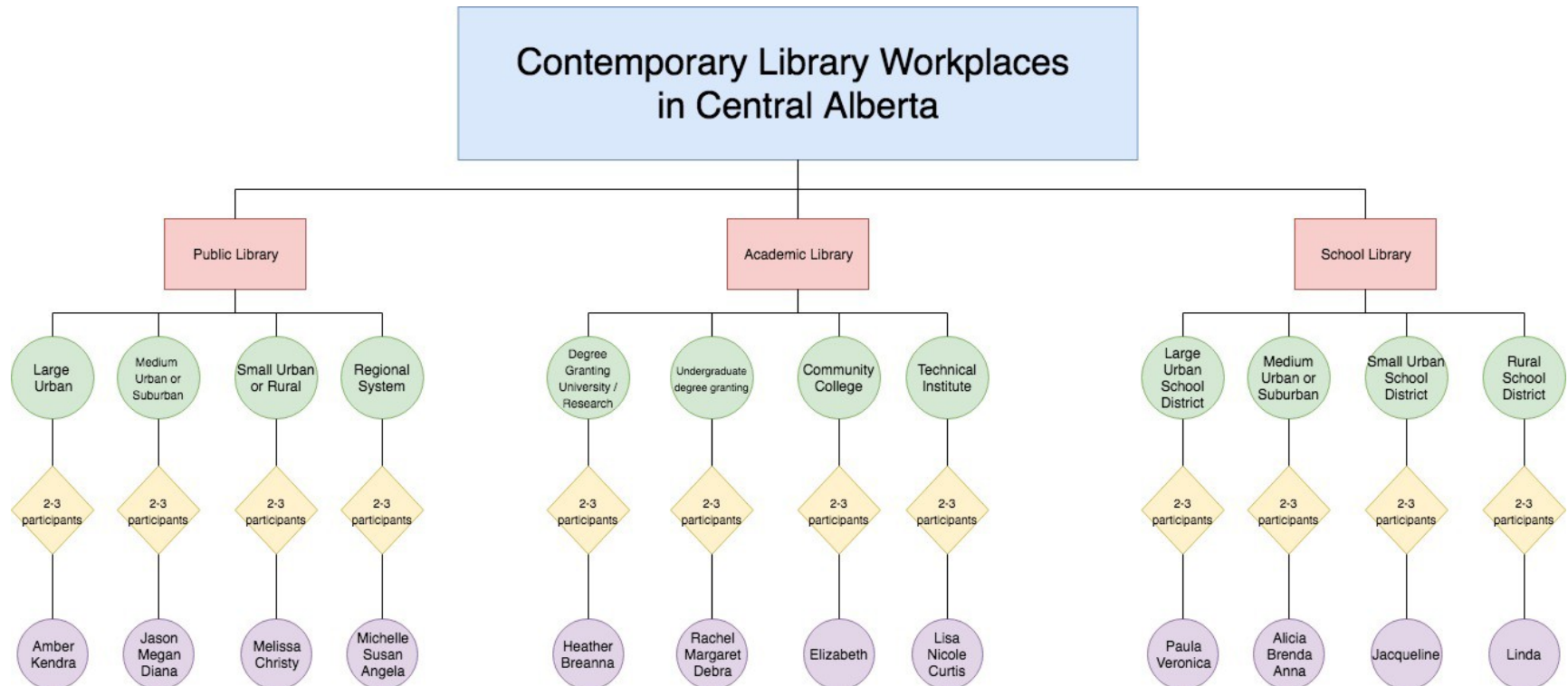
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## Appendix A: Visual Representation of Collective Case Study



## **Appendix B: Email Invitation to Join the Study**

My name is Norene Erickson and I am a doctoral student at the University of Alberta. I am conducting research into the experiences that shape work identity of library paraprofessionals in libraries in a study entitled: “The ‘Other’ Librarian: Work Identity of Library Paraprofessionals from Preparation to Practice”. I would like to speak to you about your experiences as a library paraprofessional.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of work identity for practicing paraprofessionals in school, academic and public libraries. This study asks the following question: In what ways are library paraprofessionals’ work identities formed? This study aims to describe these experiences of library paraprofessionals. Further understanding of paraprofessional experiences is important to strengthen the opportunities and future direction of the occupation. The principal investigator for this project is a PhD student with the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. Any findings from this study will appear in a report to be read by the researcher’s dissertation committee and her supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Branch-Mueller.

### **Procedures & Confidentiality**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked questions about your experiences and opinions about your work as a library paraprofessional. You will be interviewed at least once for one to two hours. Interviews will take place either face-to-face or over Skype and will be recorded (voice only).

All your responses will be kept strictly confidential. Any identifying information, such as your name and the organization for which you work, will be removed from the transcript

resulting from our interview and will not be included in any publication that might come from this study. Please be aware that although direct quotations may be used in the writing of the report, your anonymity will be ensured by the use of a random name chosen specifically for this study and attached to any documents resulting from our interview. Interview recordings and transcripts will be kept on a password-protected computer accessible only by the researcher

### **Risks & Benefits**

The risks of participating in this study are no more than the risks of everyday life. You do not need to talk about anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. You might not experience direct benefits from participating in this project; however, as the aim of this research is to provide insight into paraprofessionals' experiences in libraries, your participation in this study will help address a gap in the Library and Information Sciences (LIS) literature. There is no reimbursement of expenses incurred during participation in this study.

### **Freedom to Withdraw**

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study up to one week following our interview without penalty or explanation. At any time during the interview you may refuse to answer a question, request that the interview be stopped, and ask that the recording device be stopped. If you choose to withdraw, any data collected will be destroyed and your participation in the study will remain confidential.

If you have any questions, would like further details, or would like to schedule a time to speak, please contact me at [njames@ualberta.ca](mailto:njames@ualberta.ca) or (780) 982-3462. My supervisor, Dr.



Jennifer Branch (jbranch@ualberta.ca) is also available should you have further questions regarding the study.

Sincerely,

Norene Erickson

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 2 (REB1) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the REB2 Research Ethics Board at (780) 492-2615. This office has no affiliation with the study investigators.

## **Appendix C: Informed Consent Form**

### **The ‘Other’ Librarian: Work Identity of Library Paraprofessionals from Preparation to Practice**

**Principal Investigator:** Norene Erickson

The purpose of this study is to examine the construction of work identity for practicing paraprofessionals in school, academic and public libraries. Gaining insights into the experiences of library paraprofessional and how that experience shapes their work identity has a number of important benefits. It will contribute to the base of research evidence, which may help to develop a synergetic culture of workers in libraries. This study will also contribute to the research about library paraprofessionals perceptions of their work identity, which may be important to strengthen the opportunities and future direction of the occupation. Research outcomes may also be used to guide library paraprofessional education programs with respect to the perceived value of personal and social identity development. As an educator and researcher, I hope this study will prompt conversation about library workplace culture and relationships, with the ultimate desire to see library staff, regardless of position, feeling valued and fulfilled in their work.

The principal investigator for this project is a PhD student with the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. Any findings from this study will appear in a report to be read by the researcher’s dissertation committee and her supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Branch-Mueller.

### **Procedures & Confidentiality**

As the purpose of this study is to learn more about your experience as a library paraprofessional, if you agree to participate, you will be asked questions about your work as a paraprofessional. You will be interviewed at least once for one to two hours.

Interviews will take place either face-to-face or over Skype and will be recorded (voice only).

All your responses will be kept strictly confidential. Any identifying information, such as your name and the organization for which you work, will be removed from the transcript of your interview and will not be included in any publication that might come from this study. Please be aware that although direct quotations may be used in the writing of the report, your anonymity will be ensured by the use of a random name chosen specifically for this study and attached to any documents resulting from our interview. Interview recordings and transcripts will be kept on a password-protected computer accessible only by the researcher.

### **Risks & Benefits**

The risks of participating in this study are no more than the risks of everyday life. You do not need to talk about anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. You might not experience direct benefits from participating in this project; however, as the aim of this research is to provide insight into paraprofessional experiences, your participation in this study will help address a gap in the Library and Information Sciences (LIS) literature. There is no reimbursement of expenses incurred during participation in this study.

### **Freedom to Withdraw**

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study up to thirty days following our interview without penalty or explanation. At any time during the interview, you may refuse to answer a question, request that the interview be stopped at any time, and ask that the recording device be stopped. If you choose to withdraw, any

data collected will be destroyed and your participation in the study will remain confidential.

If you have any questions, would like further details, or would like to schedule a time to speak, please contact me at [njames@ualberta.ca](mailto:njames@ualberta.ca) or (780) 982-3462. My supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Branch ([jbranch@ualberta.ca](mailto:jbranch@ualberta.ca)) is also available should you have further questions regarding the study.

Please note that you may keep a copy of this letter as part of your records.

Thank you for your time and participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Norene Erickson

Department of Educational Policy Studies

University of Alberta

Email: [njames@ualberta.ca](mailto:njames@ualberta.ca)

Phone: (780) 982-3462

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 2 (REB2) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Board at (780)-492-2615. This office has no affiliation with the study investigators.

## Participant Consent Form

Consent Form for The 'Other' Librarian: Work Identity of Library Paraprofessionals from Preparation to Practice

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (print name), have read and understood the information letter and agree to participate in the study being conducted by Norene Erickson.

I understand that participation in this study will include the following activities:

- participation in interview
- audio/screencast recording of the interview
- photographs
- Follow-up Skype or telephone calls
- Contact by email for clarification
- Work products
- Work job description
- Workplace document
- Job advertisement posting

I also understand that:

- I may decide not to participate at all, or may withdraw from the research up until 30 days after the interview is completed
- if I choose to withdraw from the study, any data already collected from me will be destroyed
- my name will not be associated with the data and anything that does identify me will be destroyed after five years
- I will not be identifiable in any documents resulting from this research and a pseudonym will be used to protect my identity
- all data collected through this research will be kept in a secure location for a minimum of five years at the end of the project, at which time the data will be destroyed
- the results of this research may be presented in papers and other articles, conference presentations, web postings, or used in teaching.
- any interviews that occur online (e.g., Skype) or in person will be recorded for the purposes of transcription
- I will be able to access the final research results at the completion of the study by contacting the researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Email address of participant

Date Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions about this study, or would like to withdraw, please contact

Norene Erickson (njames@ualberta.ca) or 780-982-3462.

I will conduct this research and handle all data in compliance with the Standards for Ethical Research. The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 2 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615. This office has no affiliation with the study investigators.

\*Please sign this consent form and scan and return one copy by email to Norene Erickson (njames@ualberta.ca).

## **Appendix D: Interview Questions**

**Questions about the participant. The purpose of these questions is to get to know basic information about the participant and the current job**

1. How long have you been a library technician? (when did you graduate?)
2. What other post-secondary education do you have (if any)?
3. What other jobs have you held in your adult life?
4. What is your job title and how long have you been employed in your current job?
5. Does your position have a written job description? Is it reflective of the job that you perform?

**The purpose of these questions is to get to know more about the participant's post-secondary experiences.**

1. How did you decide to become a library technician? What drew you to the work?
2. How did you decide to work in a (school, academic, public) library?
3. Was there anything that surprised you about the library technician program? Was it different than you expected it to be or the same as you expected it to be?
4. What was the best part about the library technician program?
5. What was the worst part about the library technician program?
6. When you graduated, what did you look forward to the most about entering into library work?
7. When you graduated, what concerned or worried you the most about entering into library work?
8. If you could give advice to others who are thinking of entering a library technician program, what would you say?

**The purpose of these questions is to get to know more about the participant's roles and responsibilities as a library technician.**

1. How would you describe the work you do?
2. When you first started working as a library technician, how was it the same or different from what you thought it would be like?
3. What kinds of activities or experiences in your current work as a library technician have been enjoyable or memorable in some way?
4. Can you think of anything that sometimes makes working as a library technician frustrating or challenging?
5. What makes you feel secure/insecure in your current library position?
6. In what ways do you think you contribute to the work of the institution?
7. Do you see yourself as similar or different from other library technicians that you know?
8. How would you say the work of being a library technician has changed over the years?
9. If you could, are there things you would change about the (school, academic, public) library to make it a better experience for you as a library technician?

10. If you could give advice to your administration or management about how to make things better for library technicians, what would you say?

**The purpose of these questions is to get to know more about the participant's relationships with people they work with.**

1. During a normal workday, describe some typical work interactions
  - With pages or library clerks?
  - With other library technicians?
  - With librarians?
  - With supervisors or managers?
2. When thinking about your co-workers, what are the things you enjoy the most about working with them?
3. When thinking about your co-workers, what are the things you enjoy the least about working with them?
4. My understanding is that you work closely with librarians. Can you tell me about what this is like? *(ask this question if applicable)*
5. What aspects of working with librarians have gone well?
6. What aspects of your work with librarians have not gone so well?
7. What things have helped strengthen your working relationship with the librarians you work with?
8. What things do the librarians you work with do to help support your work?
9. What are the most important things librarians need to know or skills they need to have to work effectively with library technicians?
10. What are librarians you work with currently doing to support you that makes you more effective?
11. What else could they do to help make you more effective?



## **Appendix E: School Library Paraprofessional Job Descriptions and Daily Schedule**

This job description was created from information supplied by some of the participants as well as publicly accessible job advertisements. These job advertisements were found on the Foothills Library Association Jobline (<http://jobline.fla.org>), where there is a retrospective and comprehensive list of available positions across Alberta. The list of duties will vary depending on the size of the school district, the amount of support that comes from school administration, on the size of and grade ranges in the school, and whether a teacher-librarian or other staffs is taking on some of the responsibilities. The job titles vary widely, from Library Assistant or Technician, to Librarian, to Learning Commons Coordinator. The job description reflects a learning commons environment, which was common amongst all participants.

The daily schedule was created based on the participants' descriptions of their daily tasks. This may be a typical schedule for a school library paraprofessional in Alberta. It is a synthesis of duties that were expressed by the participants. Job duties may vary widely between elementary, junior high and senior high environments, but for purposes of simplicity and to reflect the common descriptions given by the participants, this schedule portrays what might likely occur in the daily life of a K-9 library paraprofessional.

## **Job Description**

### **Library Technician - Learning Commons**

The library technician, as a member of the learning commons team and under the guidance of the teacher designate/teacher-librarian and the school Principal, provides administrative and technical support for all members of the school community in all aspects of the operation of a school learning commons.

Major responsibilities may include:

- Welcome users to the learning commons and contribute to a responsive learning environment available to individuals and groups to use for multiple purposes.
- Facilitate student and staff use of learning commons resources such as books, web access, databases, computers, mobile technologies, video, and audio.
- Collaborate with staff in the creation, delivery and evaluating of student-focused activities in the learning commons.
- Adding, circulating and managing resources in the library system (including the classification, cataloguing, and processing of materials according to standard library practices).
- Selection, integration, use and maintenance of technology in the learning commons.
- Monitoring students to maintain a positive learning environment in the learning commons and escalates any issues to appropriate authority.
- Identify emerging student-focused learning tools and technology and oversee their integration into the learning commons (e.g. Makerspace).
- Supervision and training of work experience students, student and parent volunteers.
- Coordination of sharing learning resource materials with school libraries within the district.
- Organize library activities, fundraising, and school events (e.g. book fairs)
- Updating the school and library website.

### **Skill/Experience/Education**

- Completion of post-secondary library technician diploma
- Demonstrated aptitude in technology (including Word, Excel, integrated library systems)

- Effective organization and communication skills
- Ability to work independently and as part of a school tea
- An understanding of and ability to develop a learning commons environment
- Flexible and able to adapt to change
- Friendly, positive and collaborative

## Daily Schedule

DAILY WORK LOG		SCHEDULE START TIME	TIME INTERVAL
		8:00 AM	30 MIN
		Learning Commons Assistant K-9	
NOTES			
Textbook returns begin Monday, June 11th			
Book Makerspace room M-F for Grade 8 project 11:00 - 12:00			
Investigate new Reader's Choice award selections			
Fix printer in back room			
Plan class for grade 4- Internet safety			
Investigate cost of STEM items for Makerspace			
Weed collection prior to inventory			
Attend district meeting for technicians May 21st			

TIME	Tuesday, May 1, 18
8:00 AM	Open library
8:30 AM	Check out Chromebooks - gr. 6
9:00 AM	Kindergarten - Ms. Rush's class
9:30 AM	Grade 1 - Mr. Jenkins
10:00 AM	Flex library time gr. 4-6
10:30 AM	Recess - Supervise gr. 5 helpers
11:00 AM	Grade 5 - Japan project - resources needed
11:30 AM	Lunch
12:00 PM	Supervise Genius Hour projects - makerspace room
12:30 PM	Supervise Genius Hour projects - makerspace room
1:00 PM	Grade 7 - Aztec island with Lego competition
1:30 PM	Grade 7 - Aztec island with Lego competition
2:00 PM	Grade 9 - research project Canadian social justice
2:30 PM	Grade 9 continued
3:00 PM	New display - Summer reading club
3:30 PM	Cataloguing
4:00 PM	Staff meeting - lunch room
4:30 PM	
5:00 PM	
5:30 PM	
6:00 PM	

## **Appendix F: Academic Library Paraprofessional Job Descriptions and Daily Schedule**

This is a typical job description and daily schedule for an academic library paraprofessional in Alberta. The job description was created from information supplied by some of the participants as well as publicly accessible job advertisements. These job advertisements were found on the Foothills Library Association Jobline (<http://jobline.fla.org>), where there is a retrospective and comprehensive list of available positions for across Alberta. The daily schedule was created based on the participants' descriptions of their daily tasks. The list of duties and job titles vary depending on the position and the size of the academic institution. A recent search on the Foothills Library Association Jobline showed a variety of job titles attributed to academic library paraprofessional positions; for example, Library Assistant, Senior Library Technician, Metadata Assistant, Assistant Director, Public Service Assistant, Collections and Digital Management Assistant, Audio-Visual Technician, and Client Services Technician. For this reason, it is impossible to create a job description and daily schedule that is entirely representative of all participants. The descriptions provided contain general elements that may be present in most academic library paraprofessional positions but does not reflect senior positions that might focus on supervision and administrative tasks, or positions with a unique focus and/or responsibilities.

## Job Description

### Library Assistant - Academic Library

The library assistant provides reference, borrower services and technology support to students, faculty, researchers, staff and other clients. Other specialized duties may include duties such as web development, assistance in the delivery of library instruction, projects related to the particular activities of the academic library, conducting tours and orientations, supporting and contributing to the development of finding aids, and providing assistance and backup to others in the division.

Major responsibilities may include:

- Provide reference services to students, faculty, and the general public via in-person, chat, email, or phone. This may include conducting a reference interview, directing the user towards resources both in-house and remote, citation management applications, and interpretation of research results.
- Facilitate the use of technologies including the library catalog, database or web resources, and technical help such as printing, saving, and downloading.
- Collaborate with and assist librarians in the creation of instructional programs and services, such as information literacy sessions and online subject guides.
- Provide circulation services and apply library policies in a fair and reasonable manner.
- Contribute to decisions on collection development by working with subject

matter experts. Other specialized duties depending on the location:

- Communicate with vendors and publishers to acquire hard to find library materials
- Assist with digitization of materials
- Train all incoming circulation staff and student shelvees
- Competency in ILL, ILS, and serials management software
- Engage daily with social media for library promotions and advocacy

### Skills/Experience/Education

Two years post-secondary education in Library and Information Technology; plus, two years related library experience. University degree is an asset.

- In-depth knowledge of information resources.
- Strong interpersonal, verbal and written communication skills.
- Excellent knowledge of web technologies and emerging trends in libraries.

- Analytical and problem solving skills.
- Ability to work both independently and as a member of a team.
- Ability to be flexible in a dynamic environment.

## Daily Schedule

### DAILY WORK LOG

SCHEDULE START TIME

8:00 AM

TIME INTERVAL

30 MIN

TIME	Tuesday, May 1, 18
8:00 AM	Website content updating/LibGuides
8:30 AM	Website content updating/LibGuides
9:00 AM	Assist with ENGL100 APA class
9:30 AM	ENGL100 APA Class
10:00 AM	Break/emails
10:30 AM	Service desk
11:00 AM	Service desk
11:30 AM	Service desk
12:00 PM	Lunch
12:30 PM	Lunch
1:00 PM	Reference chat off-desk / Collection maintenance
1:30 PM	Reference chat off-desk / Collection maintenance
2:00 PM	Staff meeting - lunch room
2:30 PM	Project work - Govt docs
3:00 PM	Project work - Govt docs
3:30 PM	Service desk
4:00 PM	Service desk
4:30 PM	End of day
5:00 PM	

**Public Services Technician**

#### NOTES

Update Classical  
Mythology LibGuide

Update ILS policy binder  
for software upgrade  
software upgrade

Attend Humanities staff  
meeting

Prepare for Support Staff  
Day presentation

Submit conference report



## **Appendix G: Public Library Paraprofessional Job Descriptions and Daily Schedule**

These are typical job descriptions for public library paraprofessionals in both public and technical services in Alberta. The job description was created from information supplied by some of the participants as well as publicly accessible job advertisements. These job advertisements were found on the Foothills Library Association Jobline (<http://jobline.fla.org>), where there is a retrospective and comprehensive list of available positions for across Alberta. A daily schedule was created for public library paraprofessionals only; technical service daily schedules consist mainly of deskwork, without scheduled shifts in various places, and providing a sample schedule would not necessarily give insight into the work they do on a daily basis.

The public service daily schedule was created based on the participants' descriptions of their daily tasks and is indicative of a typical, mid to large public library. The list of duties and job titles of public service paraprofessionals will vary depending on the job's responsibilities and the size of the public library. Job descriptions and daily schedules will look vastly different from each other, but also, within each specific environment of public libraries they might look different, depending on things such as supervisory responsibilities that might be part of some positions, the size of the library, specializations (such as children's services), and other factors.

## **Job Description**

### **LIBRARY ASSISTANT – PUBLIC SERVICES**

The library assistant provides customer-focused, customer-friendly and timely services to all library users who visit the library in-person or remotely. Specialized duties may include children and teen programming, executing summer reading club events, social media interaction, and active community outreach such as visiting local schools and organizations.

Major responsibilities may include:

- Provide excellent service to library customers
- Provide reference and reader's advisory services to in person, email and chat reference questions
- Provide library orientation and instruction for users
- Create and implement library programs for all ages in consultation with the Library management
- Issue/renew/update library memberships and other circulation services
- Troubleshoot problems on any technology resource

May be required to do:

- Administrative and technical services such as data entry, maintaining library records, and statistics
- Interlibrary loans, overdue procedures, and cash handling
- Create and maintain relevant library displays, update social media, design and create promotional materials

Skills/Experience/Education

- Two years post-secondary education in Library and Information Technology; plus two years related library experience
- Experience in providing reference and reader's advisory service is preferred
- In-depth knowledge of information resources
- Strong interpersonal, verbal and written communication skills
- Ability to assist customers and facilitate customer programs using new technologies
- Ability to work both independently and as a member of a team
- Ability to be flexible in a dynamic environment

## LIBRARY TECHNICIAN – TECHNICAL SERVICES

Under the direction of the Bibliographic Service Manager, the Library Technician works with fellow cataloguing team members to perform duties related to cataloguing for the regional library system (or library).

Major responsibilities may include:

- Create or modify new and existing authority and bibliographic records.
- Ensure catalog records comply with the international standards such as RDA, AACR2, Library of Congress subject headings, Dewey-Decimal classification and Library of Congress classification.
- Proficiency in the use of MARC bibliographic formats
- Comply with local cataloguing practice and procedures
- Cooperates as a team member in performing any duty essential to achieve the organization's goals and objectives

Skills/Experience/Education

- Library Technician diploma; prefer two years experience
- Able to analyze and problem solve
- Accuracy and attention to detail
- Communicate effectively, verbal and written
- Strong work ethic and positive team attitude
- Able to work effectively both on your own for long periods of time or with a team
- Computer literacy

## Daily Schedule

# DAILY WORK LOG

TIME	Tuesday, May 1, 18
9:00 AM	Cash Box Reconciliation
9:30 AM	Off-desk duties: program planning
10:00 AM	Program: Preschool storytime
10:30 AM	Program: Preschool storytime
11:00 AM	Clean up / Coffee break
11:30 AM	Shelf reading
12:00 PM	Lunch
12:30 PM	Lunch
1:00 PM	Customer Service Desk
1:30 PM	Customer Service Desk
2:00 PM	Customer Service Desk
2:30 PM	Coffee
3:00 PM	Roaming/On the Floor
3:30 PM	Roaming/On the Floor
4:00 PM	Shelf reading/collection maintenance
4:30 PM	Shelf reading/collection maintenance
5:00 PM	Home
5:30 PM	
6:00 PM	
6:30 PM	

SCHEDULE START TIME
9:00 AM

TIME INTERVAL
30 MIN

**Library Technician**

NOTES	
Tuesday: Outreach	Summer Reading Program
Junior High: 9:30 AM	
Tuesday: Outreach	Summer Reading Program
Elementary school: 9:00 AM	
Wednesday, May 9th	Collection Weeding
Friday, May 10th	All-Staff meeting
9:00 AM	
Friday, May 10th	Train: Chat reference
1:00 - 3:00	

## Appendix H: Participant Reference Guide

### School Participants

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Career Length</b> Early: >8 years Mid: 8-19 years Late: 20+ years	<b>Library</b>	<b>Additional Education</b>	<b>Previous Work Experience</b>
Alicia	Early	Medium urban	Undergraduate degree	For-profit industry
Anna	Late	Medium urban	Undergraduate	None
Brenda	Late	Medium urban	Some post-secondary	None
Jacqueline	Late	Small urban	None	None
Linda	Late	Rural	Diploma	Health & Life Sciences
Paula	Late	Large urban	Some post-secondary	None
Veronica	Mid	Large urban	None	Childcare; Retail

### Academic Participants

Participant	Career Length Early: >8 years Mid: 8-19 years Late: 20+ years	Type of Library	Additional Education	Previous Work Experience
Breanna	Early	University Research	Undergraduate	Retail
Curtis	Mid	Technical Institute	Undergraduate	Library-related clerical/student
Debra	Late	Undergraduate	Applied degree	Retail; school library
Elizabeth	Early	Community College	Certificate, Health Services	Public library
Heather	Late	University Research	Undergraduate	Retail; Clerical; Fine Arts
Lisa	Late	Technical Institute	None	None
Margaret	Late	Undergraduate	Partial undergraduate	Library clerk
Nicole	Mid	Technical Institute	Two years post-secondary	None
Rachel	Early	Undergraduate	Undergraduate	Retail; Office Admin

## Public Participants

Participant	Career Length Early: >8 years Mid: 8-19 years Late: 20+ years	Library	Additional Education	Previous Work Experience
Amber	Early	Large urban	Undergraduate	Library summer student
Angela	Mid	Regional library	Diploma, Communications	Writer
Christy	Early	Rural	None	Retail; shift work; library clerk
Diana	Late	Medium urban	None	School library
Jason	Mid	Medium urban	Diploma Fine Arts/Trades	Automotive industry
Kendra	Early	Large urban	Some post-secondary	Childcare; Retail; Library clerk
Megan	Mid	Medium urban	Undergraduate	Retail; Other academic library
Melissa	Late	Small urban	None	Library clerk/summer student
Michelle	Mid	Regional library	Some post-secondary	Retail; Clerical; Library clerk
Susan	Late	Regional library	None	School library; Cataloguing vendor