



# In Search of Shifting & Emergent Librarian Identities

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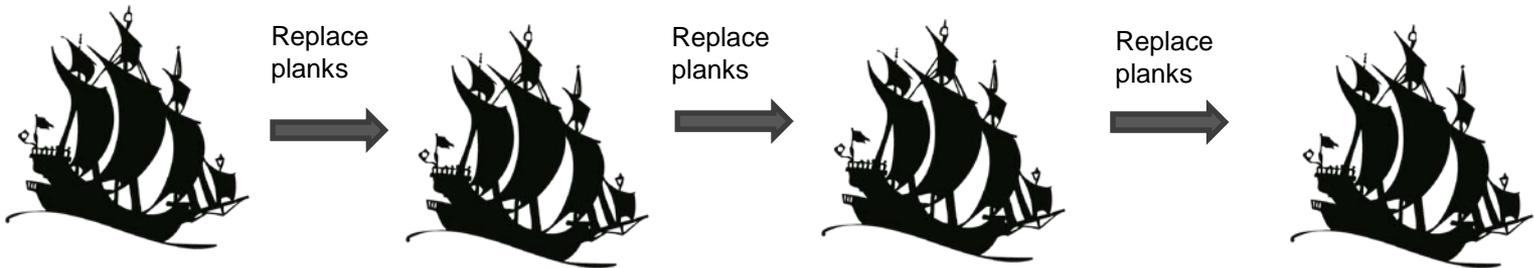


# OVERVIEW

- Mapping the Theoretical Frameworks
  - Essentialist (Objectivist) Accounts
  - Relational Accounts
- An Argument for the Relational Account
  - Essentialism is not beneficial to librarian identity
  - Settling on an essentialist identity is actually detrimental



# Scenario 1





# Identity of Objects

The Identity Relation is actually quite simple

(1) Identity is Reflexive:

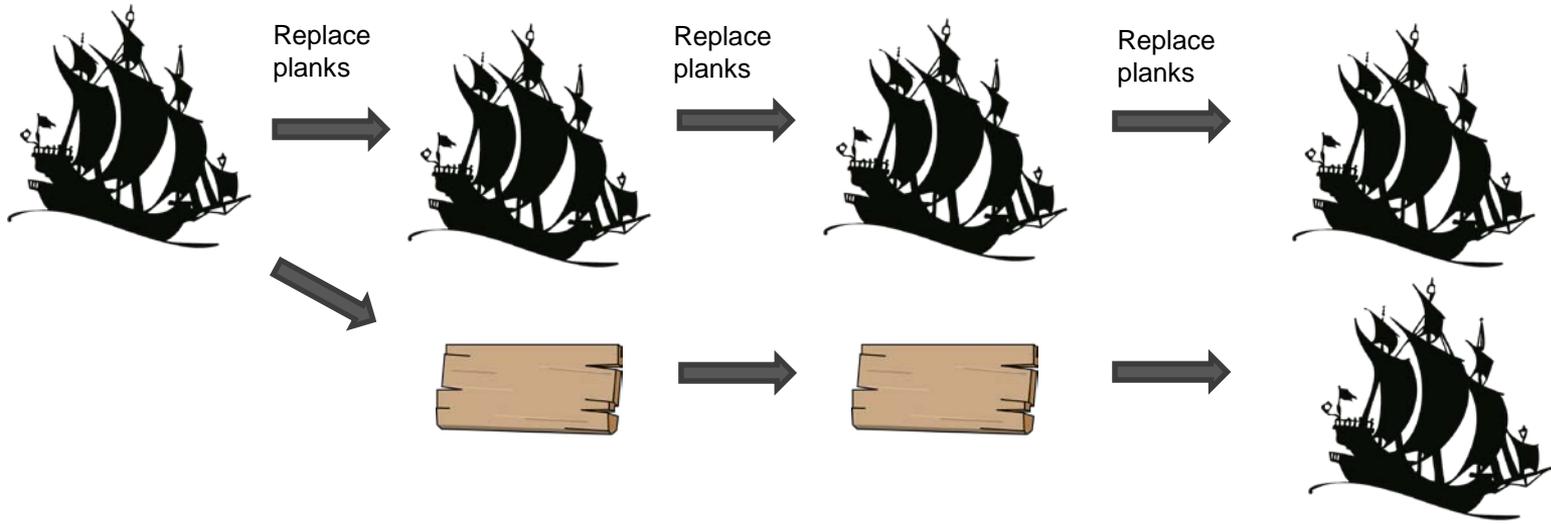
Everything is identical to itself

(2) Identity is Transitive:

- if A is identical to B, and B is identical to C, then A is also identical to C



# Scenario 1





## Identity of Objects: Essentialism

Many of the solutions to this sort of puzzle have been to try and identify something essential about the object

- The ship is *essentially* its planks
- The ship is *essentially* a seafaring transport vessel, etc.



## Identity of Objects: Function

The idea is that you can also derive the role or function of a thing if you know its essential identity

The role or function:

- what is it for?
- what does it do?





## EXAMPLE: Ship of Theseus

If the ship is *essentially* its planks, then its function is to stay intact

If the ship **is** *essentially* a seafaring transport vessel, then its function is to transport goods and people (and it performs this function well even if individual planks need replacing)

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## The Problem of Identity

This essentialist approach to identity (which works reasonably well for objects) has also been adapted to other kinds of identities:





# The Problem of Identity

- Personal Identity
  - A Person is *essentially*:
    - Their memory (Locke, 1693)
    - Their character or personality (Aristotle, c. 350 BCE; Parfit, 1971, 1986)
    - Their body (Olson 1997, 2003)



# The Problem of Identity

- Professional Identity
  - A Librarian is *essentially*:
    - Insert a characteristic
      - E.g. “collector” of books
      - E.g. teacher
      - E.g. scholar
      - E.g. “shusher”??



## The Problem of Identity

The problem with this essentialist approach is at least twofold:

- (1) It fails to capture complexity and multiple identities
  - E.g. a librarian is a scholar, teacher, collector of books, but also a subject expert and many other things
  - And **not** necessarily **all of the above**



## The Problem of Identity

- (2) It tends to objectify a person or profession, which leads to stereotyping
- Because it focuses on some single property or characteristic and so fails to acknowledge other aspects of a person or profession



## The Problem of Personal Identity

The problem is that WE (as individuals and professionals) are NOT essentially just one thing or another (or even a few things)

- We are many things at once
- We also change as time goes on



## Relational Identity

A Relational view of Identity captures the nuances of both personal and professional identity much better

**Relational Identity:** our identities are actually derived from (and grounded in) our relations to others

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## Relational Identity

- E.G. one is a parent in virtue of one's relation to a child (and there may be many ways of being a parent)





## Relational Identity

- E.G. one is a librarian in virtue of one's relation to library users
  - just as one is a doctor in virtue of one's relation to one's patients



## Deriving Relational Identity from Relations

One's Identity, as well as one's role(s) and function(s), are derived from the various ways one relates to others

E.G. as a **parent**, you perform parently roles and functions and thus have parently responsibilities

- Those ways of relating and the roles within those relations are what make you **a parent**



## Deriving Relational Identity from Relations

**BUT** these are all inevitably  
context sensitive

- E.G. a parent of a young child performs different parently roles or functions than a parent of an adult child



## Deriving Relational Identity from Relations

The same is true of librarian identity

The role and function, which is an inseparable part of the identity, depends on the relations to the service users (which depend on their needs)



## Deriving Relational Identity from Relations

- E.G. liaisons to different faculties can have different roles and functions
- E.G. the same liaison to the same faculty can relate to the users in different ways at different times (as those relationships are also dynamic)



## So Why Make Things so Complicated?

The Relational account is a  
bit messy ...

So why not just revert back  
to the nice and simple  
Essentialist model?



## Fixed Identity: What is it good for?

- Do these descriptions sound familiar? “The elusive profession”  
“Searching for librarian identity”
- Strictly defining who or what we are could ostensibly have zero bearing on what we actually do
- That’s not to say it isn’t tempting to seek an objective identity.
- Social convention tends towards essentialism.
- But we’ve never actually pinned it down.



# The Detriments of Fixed Identities

- Fixed-attribute identities are actively harmful to ourselves and our profession.
- Homogeneity/ Exclusion problem
- Progress problem
- Exploitation problem

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## Counters and Rebuttals: Objection 1

There are still similarities between what librarians do and how they relate to library users!

So we should still be able to generalize and derive a more general librarian identity from those similarities





# Counters and Rebuttals: Reply 1

But the worry with this is that it:

- leads back to essentialism
- can lead to stereotyping & objectification
- and doesn't actually capture the full multifaceted nature of librarianship
  - or the diversity of the roles librarians assume in various professional contexts

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## Counters and Rebuttals: Objection 2

It doesn't sound like the Relational view is helpful in formulating an elevator pitch about what librarians do (and who we are)?

- How do we help others know who we are as librarians and as professionals?





## Counters and Rebuttals: Reply 2

On the Relational view, we can list the things we, as librarians, do in our unique relational contexts

...but

- (1) The list will be different for different librarians
- (2) The list you give will probably not be complete



## Counters and Rebuttals: Reply 2

So ultimately, we can't give a uniform single answer

And we have to learn to be **ok** with that!

- A lack of clarity here doesn't mean a lack of precision!



## Outcomes and Consequences

We are suggesting that there **is not** (and **never was**) and **never ought** to be a fixed (essentialist) librarian identity

Librarian identity has always been (and just naturally is) fluent, dynamic, and responsive to user needs



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