Twice, within the first ten pages of his classic text *Introduction to Reference Work*, William Katz discusses the sweeping changes in the reference process that are occurring due to the advances in information retrieval technology and the Internet. He notes, however, that despite these transformational changes, “the goal (the answer to a query) remains a constant. Technology has made it possible to reach that goal faster and with added efficiency.” And again: “Because of the rapid changes occurring in information technology, the reference process will continue to change too. But its goal remains the same—to answer questions.”

Katz’s assertions express a traditional focus on answering questions with efficiency that has characterized reference work. There can be no argument with the statement that the process of reference work is indeed changing, but the research reported in this book challenges the statement that the goal of answering questions “remains a constant.”

In volume 2, Katz answers the question posed by James Rettig: “What factors do users weigh most heavily in judging the effectiveness of reference service?” Katz replies, “That’s easy. The major factor is a satisfactory answer to their question. The problem is what is ‘satisfactory.’ Is the average person expecting too much, or too little? Probably too little.”

Is this answer correct? Is it “easy” to know what makes an effective reference interaction from the user’s point of view? This book challenges the belief that users seek only satisfactory answers to their questions. Rather than imposing a definition of effective reference service, this exploration asked users to define it themselves. The research found that users and librarians differ in their descriptions of goals for reference.
In addition, the study found that more than information to answer questions is communicated in the reference interaction. There is also communication about the type of interpersonal relationship being constructed between user and librarian. That means another important goal of reference is to build positive relationships with library users. The critical importance of building these positive relationships is what this book is about.

**Interpersonal Communication and the Reference Interaction**

Interpersonal communication processes are crucial elements in the functioning of libraries in general and in the reference interaction in particular. The academic library of today can be a daunting prospect for the user. In many cases, the old familiar icons of card catalogs and paper indexes have been removed, or perhaps relegated to less visible positions and replaced by rows of computers sprouting myriad wires. Upon entering, one is immediately confronted by a confusing array of workstations with access to online catalogs, complex indexing systems, Internet connections, and a multitude of other electronic resources. Library users may quickly become lost or overwhelmed in this increasingly sophisticated environment of sources and systems.

Many times, students enter the academic library with assignment in hand thinking, “All I need is a few books or articles on my topic. I have ten minutes before my next class; I can just stop in and pick them up or maybe make a quick photocopy or two.” When faced with the incredible number and diversity of resources, students (sometimes painfully) come to the realization that what they imagined to be a simple task is not at all simple, nor can it be accomplished in ten minutes. Their initial belief that complex questions are easily answered leave them unprepared for the investment of time and energy needed. Even seasoned faculty members admit that they feel disconcerted by the rapid transformation of the library. Moreover, due to misunderstandings about the state of the art and the impact of budgetary restrictions, all types of users are frequently under the impression that every desired item is available as full text at the push of a printer button.

When library users’ attempts to find information fail (or they do not know where to start), they may choose to approach the reference desk. If they do, the librarian becomes the human interface or mediator between the library’s knowledge base and the information users’ need. The critically important moment when users approach and engage the librarian can be
the point at which the complexities of the library are gently explained, fears are calmed, and information becomes accessible. Or, if help is withheld, given grudgingly, hurriedly, or in a condescending manner, the encounter becomes the point at which the library appears even more inaccessible. Users can be left feeling confused, frustrated, and sometimes personally defeated or humiliated.

The conviction that an understanding of the interpersonal communication process between librarian and user is vital to the success of the reference encounter has driven the research reported here. Although there has been some research on the interpersonal aspects of reference service, there is much more to be explored and discovered, examined and understood.

The Dual Nature of Interpersonal Communication

There is no doubt that providing users with accurate and complete information whenever possible is a vital function of reference work. However, research in the field of interpersonal communication asserts that more than content-oriented information, or correct answers to questions, is being communicated across the reference desk. Librarians are also conveying verbal and nonverbal messages that create a particular kind of relationship with library users. Therefore, the key distinction made in this book is the one between content-oriented and relational dimensions of interpersonal communication. Content-oriented dimensions are defined as the report aspect of a message, what is being said, the information exchange. Relational dimensions signify the command aspect of a message, how the message is said, the feelings and attitudes of the participants in an interaction that define their relationship. Relational aspects also reflect the attitudes of the interactants toward one another and toward the encounter.

Two Views of a Reference Interaction

Both content and relational dimensions are present in every instance of interpersonal communication. This dual nature of communication events can be illustrated by the following interaction that took place at a busy reference department in a crowded college library. A student approached the reference desk and asked the librarian for help in locating journal articles on psychology. The librarian directed the student to a computer terminal and briefly showed her how to find articles using the PsychLit CD-ROM data-
base. The librarian returned to the reference desk, leaving the student at the computer to continue the database search.

By simply observing this interaction, it is difficult to determine whether it has been successful. Did the student find what she was looking for? Was the librarian satisfied that the student received the needed help? Did both think that this was a successful encounter? The only way to answer these questions is to ask the librarian and student involved. When asked, the two gave contradictory accounts. The student said:

I felt like she couldn’t help me on my subject. Isn’t that she didn’t know the answer, but I felt that she didn’t want to [help]... she looked like she did not know what I was talking about, a blank stare and also almost like irritated.

The librarian, however, gave this account:

I think it went all right from my viewpoint because I didn’t have to really interact too much. She seemed capable, she seemed to know what she was doing. I felt she had found what she wanted because she said she had what she needed. She seemed to be capable of handling it on her own.

According to the librarian’s report, this was a successful encounter. The response of the librarian focused on the content delivery and believed that the student “had found what she wanted because she said she had what she needed.” Yet, within the relational dimension the perceptions of the student were expressed in saying, “I felt that she didn’t want to [help]... she looked like she did not know what I was talking about, a blank stare and also almost like irritated.” Even if the correct content information was given and the search could have been completed successfully, the student felt that her interpersonal, relational needs were unsatisfied.

Like other types of interactions, the information exchange between librarian and user is not and cannot be free of these relational messages. Messages that are conveyed through verbal and nonverbal dimensions include rapport building, impression management, nonverbal approachability, and empathy. These interpersonal elements affect the ability of the librarian to successfully define the user’s question or understand
the user’s need, to successfully conduct a reference interaction, and to establish a positive relationship.

**Focus and Research Questions**

Perhaps because of their traditional concern with “getting the right answer” and the accompanying need to maintain an orderly, accessible collection of resources, librarians are often viewed as stern and forbidding. Katz commented:

> Aside from major communication problems with the library system (e.g., catalog, subject headings, index arrangement . . .), the librarian’s primary communication problem is himself. Whereas he recognizes the first one, he is loath to recognize the second. And failing to be concerned about image, he rarely takes the time to consider how the average user views his majesty and presence behind the reference desk.

Although there has been recognition of problems within the reference encounter, and recent intriguing research addresses these issues, there continues to be a need for a deeper understanding of its interpersonal dynamics. Marjorie E. Murfin and Gary M. Gugelchuck have described reference service as “poorly mapped-out territory.”

This book explores interpersonal issues in the academic reference encounter and adds to our current understanding of this complex process. It focuses on these research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of the participants regarding the relational dimensions of communication between librarian and library user in the reference encounter?

2. What is the relative importance of relational dimensions versus content dimensions of communication as perceived by librarian and library user in the reference encounter?

3. What aspects of the relational dimensions of communication are judged to be of critical importance by librarians and library users in reference encounters?

4. Do those aspects of relational dimensions of communication judged of critical importance by users differ from those of librarians, and if so, how?
Research reported here involved in-depth interviews following twenty-seven reference interactions at academic libraries. Although the sample size is small, this is often the case for qualitative research. This study does not have generalizability of findings as a goal, as would a quantitative study. Its goal is exploratory and descriptive, recognizing that “there is a world of empirical reality out there” (in this case, at the reference desk) and endeavoring to be a part of:

a long-standing intellectual community [of qualitative researchers] for which it seems worthwhile to try to figure out collectively how best to talk about the empirical world, by means of incremental, partial improvements in understanding.

The relational model of communication provides the theoretical foundation used to frame a better understanding of the reference process and to integrate the perspectives of both librarian and library user. Before the publication of a journal article based on the author’s work, this theoretical model from the field of communication had not been applied to the study of reference service in any published account. Illustrated with the eloquent voices of both library users and librarians, the results help to explain the complex nature of the communication process inherent in reference interactions.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the library literature on the reference interaction, whereas chapter 3 describes the relevant communication literature. Chapter 4 describes the methodology for selection of sites and subjects, data collection, instruments, and the methodology for three data analysis techniques. Chapters 5 through 8 describe the results of the three analyses. Chapter 9 gives the practical and theoretical implications of this work with recommendations for future study.

Notes
2. Ibid., 10.


13. Thus, no generalizability is sought for these findings, see chapter 9 for limitations.


15. Ibid., 11.