Chapter 2

Literature on the Reference Interaction

Few areas of librarianship have received as much attention as reference, and the literature on the subject is vast. A review of that literature finds long-standing concerns with reference both as information transfer and interpersonal interaction. For an investigator about to undertake an in-depth study of reference librarians and users of reference, a review of the literature identifies factors that can affect the research and issues that may be important to those persons studied. The literature review in this chapter covers the major issues of information transfer and interpersonal aspects of reference. Because interpersonal aspects are the subject of this book, they are covered in much more depth than reference as information transfer. The literature review discusses ways librarians have conceived of reference service and how they have endeavored to improve their interaction with users. It covers studies of librarians and users. It includes material from other fields that is relevant and highlights current issues. Finally, it introduces the potential value of communication theory to the study of reference, a topic covered in depth in the next chapter.

Reference as Information Transfer
Benita V. Howell, Edward B. Reeves, and John van Willigen characterize the reference interaction as a “fleeting encounter,” the rapid establishment of effective communication between two strangers. This “fleeting encounter” has been the subject of a substantial body of literature, much of it taking the view that “effective communication” equals information delivery.
conceive of the reference encounter as a “fairly straight forward matter of an informed person imparting knowledge to a less informed one.”3 Wayne W. Couch defines the reference interaction as “any interview in which one person is attempting to understand what information another person wants.”4 According to William Young, the reference interview, is: “The interpersonal communication between a reference staff member and a library user to determine the precise information needs of the user.”5 Helen M. Gothberg characterized the interaction as “a ‘process’ involving tools, service, library organization, and human communication.”6 To Thomas Lee Eichman, the object of the reference librarian was to connect the inquirer’s mind to the library’s store of knowledge.7 This view is seconded by Marilyn Domas-White: “It is important to recognize that the librarian’s primary responsibility in the interview is to resolve the information need, not simply to understand the verbalized question.”8

Much of the literature that studies the librarian’s role in the reference interaction emphasizes the quality of the information exchange. A substantial number of researchers have focused on an evaluation of how well the librarian finds the correct factual answer to specific questions.9 Many researchers have tried to determine the percentage of “right” answers given by librarians. They have employed proxy users who asked test questions whose answers had been ascertained by those conducting the studies. Their results share a commonality in that:

they show that the user of a library faces a surprisingly low probability that his factual question will be answered accurately. Overall, the studies tend to support a probability in the range of 50 to 60% with some libraries or groups of libraries doing much worse than this, and a few doing rather better.10

The consistency of these findings has resulted in the general acceptance of “the 55% Rule.”11 However, the 1996 “Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals” contend that “Reference performance cannot be measured solely by the accuracy of an answer to a factual question.” They remind those who focus on research that led to the 55% Rule that such studies “do not take into account the complex librarian/patron interaction during the reference process.”12
Writing about the 55% Rule had an enormous impact within the library profession. Emphasis on the information transfer aspects of reference was raised to a new level. Although this book focuses on the other aspects—interpersonal aspects—of the reference encounter, readers should not forget what a large, arguably predominant, role the concept of reference as information transfer has played in the library profession.13

**Interpersonal Issues in the Reference Interaction**

Although virtually all librarians recognize the vital importance of information transfer in reference, there is, at the same time, a long tradition of concern for interpersonal dimensions of reference work. In 1944, for example, Margaret Hutchins produced an influential textbook that gave a chapter to the reference encounter, emphasizing that human interaction was as important as technical expertise.14 During the 1950s and 1960s, others addressed the importance of communication between user and librarian. Robert S. Taylor’s seminal article introducing the term *question negotiation* to describe the reference process was perhaps the most influential theoretical work of this period.15 He proposed that there are “five filters through which a question passes, and from which the librarian selects significant data to aid him in his search.”16 These five filters were:

- determination of subject;
- objective and motivation;
- personal characteristics of inquirer;
- relationship of inquiry description to file organization;
- anticipated or acceptable answers.

Taylor’s work influenced several related studies in the late 1960s and 1970s that emphasized the analysis and description of communication dynamics. Samuel Rothstein observed that these studies’ “main achievement has been to make for greater awareness of the negotiation of the reference question as being in large part a communications problem.”17

One of the most important components of this communication problem has often been users’ inability to describe what they want to know. As Taylor put it:

> We are dealing here of course with a very subtle problem—how one person tries to find out what another person wants to know, when the latter cannot describe his need precisely.18
Some researchers believe that the users’ inability to describe their need is experienced as an “anomalous state of knowledge” (ASK) involving a: somehow inadequate or incoherent state of knowledge . . . [where] an information need arises from a recognized anomaly in the user’s state of knowledge concerning some topic or situation and that, in general, the user is unable to specify precisely what is needed to resolve that anomaly.19

Approaches to the Reference Process
Given the complexity of the reference encounter and the need to attend to its interpersonal dynamics, librarians have proposed a variety of approaches to the reference process. For example, Terry Ann Mood has claimed that the library profession is “embracing a ‘new paradigm of reference.’”20 In this paradigm—typified by the Brandeis University model—the librarian takes on the role of consultant.21 Users make the first approach to paraprofessionals or graduate students who provide information desk service and refer users, as necessary, to the librarians, sometimes by appointment only. Others have suggested that the librarian should be viewed as a personal librarian22 or a teacher.23 Alternatively, Joan M. Bechtel suggested that the interaction be conceptualized as a conversation.24 Elaine Z. Jennerich and Edward V. Jennerich’s book, now in its second edition, views the reference encounter as a “creative art.”25

Another approach applies psychological counseling techniques to reference.26 Patrick R. Penland extensively studied the area of interviewing and advisory counseling. He advocated improved librarian–user communication through training in human relations and guidance counseling. Penland’s book *Interpersonal Communication* integrated communication theory and research with library science, psychology, and mass communication.27

W. Bernard Lukenbill promoted utilization of the principles of the helping relationship as described by N. I. Brill in *Working with People: The Helping Process* that stressed the development of empathy, attentive behavior, and active listening.28 Similarly, Pamela Tibbets proposed that librarians should have sensitivity training to “deal with the entire person and not just his information needs.”29 She argued that if librarians became more aware of users’ needs and attitudes, they would serve those users better: “The librarian may find exactly what the person has asked for, but make him so miser-
able in the process that he will never come in again.”

This presents a dilemma because the librarian wants to be held in high esteem as professionally and technically competent and yet strives to be viewed as approachable and nonthreatening. Eichman observed that many other professionals and nonprofessionals have to interact with individuals in ways similar to that of the librarian. One resemblance to other helping professions is that, in general, the user comes in person for assistance. The librarian must then gain the user’s confidence and maintain it “long enough to provide the needed assistance.”

Several authors have compared librarianship to the medical profession and identified commonalities. Carolyn J. Radcliff believes that librarian–user interactions can be “informed through the analysis of research into physician–patient relationships.” In the delivery of health care, the patient approaches the doctor with an illness that the doctor must diagnose and treat. “The patient is relatively unimportant in this process. The disease is of interest.” In the library setting, the user approaches with an information need that the librarian must diagnose and treat with available information-seeking methods, again implying, in this case, that the user is not important. Brenda Dervin believes that this “view of information and service does not work. Perhaps most obvious is the increasing demand by users of systems that they be treated as individuals.”

According to Marilyn D. White, however, the librarian–user relationship should be modeled on the interaction between doctor and patient. The diagnosis “is the mark of a truly professional encounter.” When patients come to the doctor, they may have already diagnosed the illness. The doctor, however, checks symptoms and makes his or her own diagnosis. Similarly, when the user approaches the reference librarian with a question (i.e., diagnosis), it is “still the librarian’s professional responsibility to verify its accuracy.” White notes that many librarians are not comfortable with the role of diagnostician.

Studies of Librarians’ Attitudes and Behaviors
Librarians’ attitudes and behaviors play a central (if obvious) role in the success of the reference interaction. Anne V. Mathews studied the relationship between a librarian’s self-acceptance and confirming behavior toward the user. She identified four confirming behaviors:

- shows interest;
• replies appropriately;
• responds clearly;
• clarifies what has been said by a statement or rephrasing.

She also identified four disconfirming behaviors:
• shows indifference (does not look up from work);
• disqualifies user—type I (gives irrelevant, unclear, or contradictory reply);
• disqualifies user—type II (speaks for the other);
• demonstrates imperiousness (is critical of the other).

Other authors developed recommendations for improving and/or evaluating librarian–user interaction. A typical prescription was provided by White, who listed eleven indicators of rapport with and respect for users, among them:
• a positive, helpful attitude;
• absence of behavior that elicits defensiveness such as use of jargon, or a condescending or omniscient air;
• use of open questions when appropriate;
• sensitivity to client’s frame of reference.39

Research has addressed some of White’s points. For example, Brenda Dervin and Patricia Dewdney investigated the effects of “neutral questioning,” a type of open-ended questioning.40 This type of questioning is non-threatening to users as it avoids intruding upon them (e.g., asking why information is needed).

Mark V. Thompson, Nathan M. Smith, and Bonnie L. Woods proposed that appropriate librarian self-disclosure would help users to be more secure and comfortable.41 Self-disclosure involves librarians giving users information about themselves such as admitting, “I am not sure where to look for this.” Marilyn V. Markham, Keith H. Stirling, and Nathan M. Smith investigated the effect of librarian self-disclosure on user comfort and satisfaction levels. They found users to be more self-disclosing than librarians and recommended that “librarians cultivate and practice self-disclosure.”42

Other scholars have identified reasons librarians may have difficulty with interpersonal aspects of reference. Geraldine B. King has argued that librarians have historically neglected interpersonal skills for two reasons: (1) they were not taught them in their professional courses; and (2) the literature on the reference encounter has been largely theoretical. Although some librarians have the natural ability to become excellent interviewers, the ma-
iority do not, King believes, and could vastly improve if given some basic training. According to W. Bernard Lukenbill, library school faculty do not teach communication skills because they are not trained in the area. Finally, Eichman points out that time constraints in reference interactions adversely affect communication. During busy times, when a daunting line of users forms at the reference desk, the librarian may only have a brief moment to devote to each user. These time constraints are not problematic in other interviewing situations such as the fifty minutes available to the psychotherapist or the carefully ordered appointment schedule of doctors and lawyers.

The User’s Perspective on the Reference Interaction

Recently, there has been a recognition of the importance of research that takes the user’s point of view in study of the reference encounter. For example, Patricia Dewdney and Catherine Ross reported on the experiences of seventy-seven MLS students who were directed to visit a library of their choice and ask a question that mattered to them. Only 59.7 percent reported they would be returning to the librarian with another question. In another study, Susan Edwards and Mairead Browne took a user-based approach to see if clients and librarians differ in their expectations of quality information services. They found that “by-and-large there is a congruence between librarians and academics in what they view as characteristics of a quality information service.” However, there are “points of departure between them” and librarians need to be made aware of these differences.

This attention to the user’s point of view may be a return to concerns of studies that were published in the 1970s. Howell, Reeves, and van Willigen examined the relative levels of satisfaction on the part of users versus librarians in reference encounters. They found that librarians tended to rate their levels of performance less favorably than users. This finding suggested that librarians had much higher levels of expectation for their performance than did users. It also implied that users may not have been able to differentiate the quality of the information they received from their gratitude for being helped. Howell, Reeves and van Willigen proposed that “Questions aimed at discovering patron expectations for service and forcing patrons to make the distinction between the psychological and substantive outcome of reference encounters would be useful additions to future patron satisfaction survey instruments.” Finally, they found that users
were more satisfied with the librarians if instruction was provided along with the information.\textsuperscript{51}

A study by Helen Gothberg, published in the 1970s, applied the immediacy principle of communication scholar Albert Mehrabian to the reference process. The immediacy principle asserts that “people are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, and prefer, and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer.”\textsuperscript{52} Gothberg found that users were more satisfied with the interview and with their own performance when the librarian had given them immediate verbal and/or nonverbal recognition. There was no difference in users’ satisfaction with regard to the information received. These findings suggested “that a reference librarian who displays immediate verbal and nonverbal communication skills will engender in a user better feelings about himself and his experiences in the library.”\textsuperscript{53}

\section*{Nonverbal Communication}

Nonverbal communication plays an important part in the success of reference encounters. Bissy Genova looked at intermediaries in presearch interviews. She sought to determine the nonverbal behaviors that facilitated or hindered the “smooth interaction flow of the interview,” the correlation between these behaviors, and the satisfaction level of user and librarian.\textsuperscript{54} Overall, Genova found that librarians were generally less satisfied than users. She also found that:

- When librarians used computer terminals, users were most satisfied.
- Librarians were less satisfied with long or interrupted interviews.

These findings indicated that interpersonal dimensions involving nonverbal communication entered into the process even when content-oriented thinking would say that the relevance of computer output (i.e., citations retrieved) should be the only factor to affect user and/or librarian satisfaction.

Gothberg’s research also points to the important role of nonverbal communication in reference service.\textsuperscript{55} The librarian usually sits behind a desk, available to users with questions. The decision to approach is made at the user’s discretion before a word is spoken. Marie L. Radford found that users based their decisions on perceptions of nonverbal behavior.\textsuperscript{56} Those librarians inviting the user to approach through exhibition of positive nonverbal behaviors (especially those making eye contact with users) were approached
much more often than those exhibiting negative behaviors (such as looking down and busying themselves with paperwork).

**Breaking Down Barriers between Users and Reference Librarians**

Other researchers have studied users' reluctance to approach reference librarians. Mary Jane Swope and Jeffrey Katzer surveyed 199 people in an academic library and found that 32 (27%) had questions but would not ask a librarian for assistance.\(^5\) The major reasons given were:

- dissatisfaction with previous librarian assistance;
- the belief that their query was too simple for the librarian;
- the disinclination to bother the librarian.

An incidental finding revealed that graduate students felt more pressure “not to appear stupid” than did undergraduates.\(^6\)

Larason and Robinson discussed psychological cost as a barrier to communication. Psychological cost related to “the drain on an individual’s self-concept, pride, or other mental/psychological attributes.”\(^7\) They described it as difficult to assess because it was often irrational (e.g., if a user needs help but avoids assistance that could provide this help because of psychological cost, it is a betrayal of self-interest). It may be that walking across the room to the reference desk to interact with a potentially condescending librarian could be too high a price to pay. Users may choose to try to find the information themselves, or even leave without it, rather than risk embarrassment.\(^8\)

Librarians concerned with becoming more approachable have offered suggestions, not based on research, for evaluation and improvement of approachability and rapport with users.\(^9\) For example, Ellis Mount’s frequently cited “Communication Barriers and the Reference Question” stated that most library users ask questions that bear little resemblance to their true information need. He identified nine “invisible barriers to clear communication that often complicate giving of good reference service.”\(^10\) The barriers involve library users who:

- lack knowledge of the depth and quality of the collection;
- lack knowledge of the reference tools available;
- lack knowledge of the vocabulary used by a particular set of tools;
- do not willingly reveal reasons for needing information;
- have not decided what they really want;
- are not at ease in asking questions;
• feel that they cannot reveal the true question because of its sensitive
  nature;
• dislike reference staff members;
• lack confidence in the ability of the reference staff.
Effective reference requires that librarians bring down these barriers.

One general approach to improving users’ receptivity to reference is to
treat them as “customers.” For example, Larason and Robinson compared
the layout of the library to that of a department store and encouraged
librarians to pay attention to packaging and marketing.63 Christopher
Millson-Martula and Vanaja Menon also believe that library users should
be viewed as customers and that academic libraries should actively col-
lect information about users through use of surveys, interviews, focus
groups, and other assessment methods to “gain insight into their
customer’s needs” and to “play an active role in shaping user behavior
and expectations.”64 Darlene E. Weingand’s Customer Service Excel-
lence: A Concise Guide for Librarians offers a wide range of advice on
treating users as customers.65

Current Concerns
In addition to attention to variations on recurrent themes of information
transfer and interpersonal factors, recent discussion of reference has ad-
dressed two increasingly important issues—the effects of information re-
trieval technology and the impact of increasing cultural diversity. Within the
past ten years, there has been an astoundingly rapid proliferation of elec-
tronic information retrieval systems in academic libraries. Numerous articles
have explored the impact of these systems and advances in telecommunica-
tions on the interactions between librarian and user and, on a broader level,
on the future of reference itself.66 Many authors wonder about the impact of
these evolutionary (perhaps revolutionary) changes on the librarian’s role.
David W. Lewis noted that “Reference librarians need to see themselves as
technology transfer agents, as the catalysts of the information revolution.
They sit at the locus between students and faculty and the rapidly changing
information technology.”67 He also warned that “those reference librarians
who do not accept the challenge will be left behind.”68

Anxiety, however, may be unwarranted. Technology, as Susan Anthes
argued, calls for “high touch,” or increased interpersonal involvement, be-
tween user and librarian as systems become more computerized and in-
increasingly complex. One reason for this is the increasing visibility of end-user systems, which have quickly become the norm in academic libraries. As contrasted to mediated search clients, end users require a different type of assistance that may involve increased expenditure of librarian attention, especially to first-time users and those with complex queries.

Another growing area of concern focuses on our multicultural society. There has been an increase in ethnic diversity within the United States and in the number of foreign students in the country in recent years. In interpersonal interactions with diverse populations, it is highly desirable to be aware of cultural differences and how they affect perceptions and to be in touch with our own cultural bias. There has also been recent attention given to differences in interpersonal communication patterns within American subcultures. R. Errol Lam, for example, discussed the need for better communication between African-American students and white librarians. He emphasized the importance of understanding the differences in both verbal and nonverbal communication styles.

A Direction for Further Study of Librarian–User Interaction

Review of the literature shows that there has been considerable attention given to evaluation of reference service, most of which centers on measuring effectiveness in terms of getting the right answer. Ellsworth Mason and Jean Mason found that the literature on evaluation of accuracy in reference has overshadowed investigation of the perceptions of interpersonal communication in interactions. Murfin and Gugelchuk commented that despite increasing publication about accuracy in reference, “substantial progress” is lacking. Many observers agree that there needs to be more research from the user’s point of view. Richard W. Budd stated that “the future of libraries and library studies relies heavily on the development of an overarching theory of information seeking and satiation. In short, it will demand intense focused research on users.”

As noted above, there have been studies that have centered on aspects of the interaction such as immediacy, questioning strategy, library anxiety, and librarian self-disclosure. But potentially fruitful approaches remain unexplored. J. W. Ellison has acknowledged the benefit of increased study of interpersonal communication theory and its application to librarianship. Dervin has distinguished between the application of communication theory and the application of information theory to the study of user behavior in
libraries. Information theory developed by Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver\textsuperscript{79} “involves the quantitative study of signals sent from senders to receivers.”\textsuperscript{80} Dervin has argued that human communication and one’s use of information is subjective in nature and not linear. Thus, communication theory, not information theory, is more important for librarianship.\textsuperscript{81} Similarly, Stuart Glogoff has encouraged librarians to broaden their knowledge of communication theory in order to improve their understanding and promote more effective communication with users.\textsuperscript{82}

Notes


16. Ibid., 183.


26. See, for example, Milena Awaritefe, “Psychology Applied to Librarianship,” International Library Review 16 (Jan. 1984): 27–33; Barbara L. Stein, James D.


30. Ibid., 494.


35. Ibid., 18.


37. Ibid., 77.


49. Howell, Reeves, and van Willigen, “Fleeting Encounters.”
50. Ibid., 127.
51. Ibid., 127.
58. Ibid., 164. Mengxiong Liu and Bernice Redfern, “Information-Seeking Behavior of Multicultural Students: A Case Study at San Jose State University,”
College & Research Libraries 58 (July 1997): 348–54, had a similar finding in a study of multicultural students who were also reluctant to “bother the librarian” when they needed help.


81. Dervin, “Useful Theory for Librarianship.”

82. Glogoff, “Communication Theory’s Role in the Reference Interview.”