

Face It! Reference Work and Politeness Theory Go Hand in Hand¹

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Effective reference service is essential to the mission of American libraries. Treating reference work as communicative activity has resulted in the identification of preferred behaviors that improve patron satisfaction with the reference encounter. Improved satisfaction leads to greater patron self-disclosure, which in turn enhances the accuracy of the reference information provided. The theoretical framework of politeness theory can both explain and predict which librarian behaviors should lead to increased patron satisfaction and ultimately improve reference outcomes. The tenets of politeness theory are identified and examined as they relate to reference encounters involving the face-to-face, telephone, e-mail, and chat reference modalities.

At least since S.S. Green's 1876 ALA speech, "The Desirableness of Establishing Personal Intercourse and Relations between Librarians and Readers in Popular Libraries," reference service has been central to the mission of American libraries.² Two of Green's stated reference functions, assisting readers in solving their inquiries and promoting the library in the community,³ are directly related to modern profes-

sional perceptions of reference, i.e., making information sources accessible to users and performing public relations work. Key to effective reference service is the reference interview,⁴ an encounter in which a reference librarian seeks to determine a user's information need and fulfills that need using information sources.⁵ Good reference work is essential in providing information necessary to users and in promoting a positive view of libraries in their communities.⁶

Reference and Communication

As with any service encounter, communication between the librarian and the user is crucial to a successful reference transaction. As Rothstein indicates, the chief point of the reference encounter is not to find the answer but to identify the user's question,⁷ a challenging communicative act, in which "one person tries to describe for another person not something he knows, but rather something he does not know."⁸ To determine the user's need effectively, the library profession has developed the reference interview, a process Taylor characterizes as a method of "interrogating users."⁹

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It is generally accepted within the study of communication that interpersonal communication has both content and relational dimensions,¹⁰ i.e., people engage in communication to accomplish goals, and at the same time they use language to create and maintain relationships. Both the content and relational dimensions of the reference interview have received attention within librarianship since Evelyn Woodruff's pioneering work on the reference encounter in 1897, emphasizing librarians' need for effective interviewing skills together with knowledge of information sources, a call echoed by James Ingersoll Wyer in 1930 and Margaret Hutchins in 1944.¹¹ Communication in the context of the reference interview at this time occurred primarily to support the content function of the reference transaction, i.e., to determine the user's information need, rather than for relational purposes.

The 1960s' emphasis on applying quantitative research methods to the social sciences gave rise to initial attempts at empirical research on, and evaluation of, reference services, with the focus on the accuracy of answers to the reference queries.¹² Studies utilizing unobtrusive observation (pseudo-users presented prepared questions to reference librarians, and the results were compared to the known answers) gave rise to the "fifty-five-percent rule": the rate of correct answers to these questions was regularly established at between fifty and sixty percent.¹³ The empirical, quantitative approach was also applied to communication within the reference interview; for instance, Taylor's 1968 "Question Negotiation and Information Seeking in Libraries" proposed that because reference was a negotiated process and thus structured communication, it could be analyzed scientifically. This "dynamism of communication" could be comprehended and taught to complement the subject and systems knowledge taught in library schools.¹⁴

Limitations to the usefulness of the accuracy studies were indicated in the 1980s. Ross pointed out the artificiality of unobtrusive questions; such queries were factual and had no apparent connection to, users' lives.¹⁵ Accuracy studies have also failed to accord importance to interpersonal interaction and instruction as significant dimensions of reference activity.¹⁶ Durrance characterizes reference work as complex human communication involving both material and interactant satisfaction; this complexity is not readily conveyed by one-dimensional measures like those used in the accuracy studies.¹⁷

This renewed interest in the interpersonal, communicative aspects of reference produced a plethora of studies of reference interaction, both verbal and nonverbal. In the area of verbal communication, research has demonstrated positive user reactions to "librarian genuineness, empathy, respect, concreteness and specificity of expression," especially in eliciting patron self-disclosure.¹⁸ User self-disclosure and satisfaction have been shown to increase when reference librarians themselves engage in self-disclosure.¹⁹ Since patron self-disclosure aids librarians in determining users' actual reference questions, King urges the use of open-ended questions to increase communicative input from patrons.²⁰ Because increased user participation during the reference transaction helps librarians to determine the user's actual reference needs, a series of studies has examined the role of closed, open, and neutral questions in enhancing patron self-disclosure in the reference interview.²¹ Together with open-ended and neutral questions, active listening can help librarians avoid "premature diagnosis," i.e., taking users' questions at face value, not performing a thorough reference interview, and not including the user in the search process, wasting both the librarian's and the user's time with inadequate or incorrect searches.²² Naismith demonstrates that users do not understand the terms that reference librarians use 50% of the time; and that this use of "expert power" is a means by which librarians assert control over the reference interview.²³ Fagan and Desai point out the need to communicate understandably to patrons, to include them in the search process, and to use humor appropriately to engage users in reference transactions.²⁴ Baker and Field demonstrate the need for both a visible display of interest in users' questions and good listening and interpersonal skills in reference librarians.²⁵ The behaviors listed above are also necessary for effective virtual reference (VR) transactions, as Ross and Nilsen have determined.²⁶

According to Mehrabian, nonverbal cues carry a large functional load in face-to-face (FtF) communication.²⁷ Reference librarians "give off" messages via their nonverbal responses to users.²⁸ Since users generally initiate reference encounters by approaching reference librarians to ask questions, it is essential that users not be made to feel that they are bothering or imposing on reference staff.²⁹ Librarians must engage in welcoming "body language" and behavior that communicates a positive attitude toward the user and

her/his query.³⁰ Such behaviors include immediacy (nonverbal behavior communicating liking, e.g., moving toward the patron, physical closeness, forward lean, eye contact, smiling, nodding), demonstrating availability, familiarity, and respect (e.g., offering a chair, avoiding a loud tone or expansive gestures); and demonstrating interest in, and a positive, nonjudgmental attitude toward, the user's question.³¹ Ross, Nilsen, and Dewdney have compiled a set of "attending skills," both verbal (active listening and minimal encouragers) and nonverbal behaviors (eye contact, smiling and nodding, and posture) that can be used in the first thirty seconds of a reference interview to "set the stage for the rest of the interview."³²

Studies of verbal and nonverbal behavior have provided valuable feedback to the library profession, and helpful behaviors have been adopted by the library profession, as demonstrated by their presence in the standard textbook on reference service and in the RUSA behavior guidelines for reference service.³³ There has been a call for helpful reference communication behaviors to be included in librarians' job evaluations,³⁴ and lists of model reference behaviors have been promulgated for use by the profession (e.g., the Rubacher Interpersonal Communication Scales for Librarians).³⁵

Reference communication behavior also affects the accuracy of answers to patrons' queries. Gers and Seward note three librarian behaviors that significantly affect accuracy: using questions to probe for users' information needs, showing interest in users' questions, and being comfortable with users' questions, which increase the likelihood of a correct answer by over 100% (in the case of showing interest, accuracy is increased by almost 150%).³⁶ Dewdney and Ross determined that user satisfaction with reference is strongly correlated with the helpfulness of the answer (a measure related to accuracy), and that overall user satisfaction is strongly correlated with the friendliness of the reference staff.³⁷

The preceding discussion has demonstrated the value of communication in answering patrons' questions, but what of S.S. Green's other important reference function, promoting the library within the community? The relational dimension of reference service has a direct influence on the perception of the library by its users.³⁸ The effect of librarians' interpersonal behavior and its perception by users has been the subject of some research, beginning with Hernon and Pas-

tine, who determined that two behaviors that made users hesitant to return to reference were librarian impatience or annoyance and the appearance of busyness on the part of reference staff.³⁹ Studies by Murfin and Bunge, Durrance, Radford, Dewdney and Ross, Ross and Dewdney, Naismith, Baker and Field, Ross and Nilsen, Ruppel and Fagan, and Mon and Janes also found that librarian behaviors were significant in users' willingness to return to reference services.⁴⁰ The Library Visit Study, the longest-running study of reference using a user-centered measurement, the user's willingness to return after experiencing a particular reference staff member,⁴¹ has demonstrated the consistency of user reactions to librarian behaviors over time and across reference modalities, from FtF reference to VR.⁴² Finally, Radford has shown that while both users and librarians rank interpersonal aspects of the reference encounter highly, librarians only rank user attitude higher than the content dimension of the transaction, followed by relationship quality. Users, however, evaluate reference transactions primarily in relational terms: first and foremost are librarian attitude and relationship quality, and then approachability. Information and knowledge base follow these interpersonal dimensions in importance.⁴³ Users and librarians apparently value different aspects of the reference interview, with users appreciating relational aspects and librarians regarding user attitude and the delivery of content. Given this dichotomy, it is no surprise that communication problems occur, and the research points to the possibility that each participant in a reference encounter might blame the other for reference failure.⁴⁴

Studies have concentrated on librarians' contribution to communication in the reference transaction because they control the encounter, by dint of status and training. However, users also have behavioral issues that can hinder and even prevent communication and thus affect reference success. For instance, studies on reference encounters have indicated that users hesitate to "bother" busy reference librarians, especially if they feel they or their questions are "stupid." In fact, they fear that librarians might reprimand them for their ignorance of facts or the research process.⁴⁵ Lederman has indicated communication apprehension, the fear of communicating with a professional at the reference desk, as another possible user issue.⁴⁶

Communication in the reference encounter has received considerable attention from library science

investigators. This research has, however, been criticized by Harris and Michell as consisting primarily of advice, suggestions for research, or exploratory research, with a small pool of subjects and inadequate reporting of methodology and results. The authors' strongest criticism concerns the lack of a "clear theoretical framework" of much of the research on reference communication.⁴⁷ Ruppel and Fagan echo this criticism in their judgment that the lists of model reference behaviors produced by library researchers "keep suggesting answers without methods."⁴⁸ Research has produced descriptions of desirable reference performance, but these models lack explanatory adequacy. That is, we know *how* reference librarians should behave in order to achieve accuracy and user satisfaction, but we lack a theory that explains *why* these behaviors are desirable. This study will provide an answer using Brown and Levinson's politeness theory.⁴⁹

Politeness Theory

Communication as a form of social interaction requires participants to express themselves clearly and politely.⁵⁰ Brown and Levinson's politeness theory proposes a rational system employed by interactants to calculate the potential threat of an utterance to the self-image and/or sense of autonomy of either the hearer or the speaker (or both) and to make linguistic adjustments in order to mitigate the potential threat while maintaining politeness.⁵¹ Politeness theory's concern for the image of the interactants is rooted in the Chinese notion of *face*. The expressions *Mien-Tzu* and *Lien* literally refer to one's physical face in Chinese, but as concepts they represent a person's different social dimensions. *Mien-Tzu* refers to the social prestige attributed to individuals by others, which can also be influenced through the acquisition or loss of wealth, power, or position.⁵² *Lien* refers to an individual's moral worth in the eyes of others and is possessed by all persons in a society to greater or lesser degree.⁵³ Both forms of face reflect the individual's personal reputation and how s/he is viewed by others. Unlike *Mien-Tzu*, which can rise and fall according to the individual's fortunes and luck, everyone is presumed to have *Lien* (i.e., moral worth) unless her/his personal conduct violates societal expectations.⁵⁴ Shame resulting from losing one's *Lien* acts as a powerful form of moral social control.⁵⁵

The Western, scholarly understanding of face is developed in the seminal works of Goffman,⁵⁶ who de-

finer it as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact."⁵⁷ Goffman views individuals as actors motivated to work on self-presentations of the identities they claim for themselves. One's face, or the positive social value being claimed by an individual, is subject to acceptance, modification, or rejection by the audience.⁵⁸ Because face and deference can only be received from others within a social interaction,⁵⁹ it is in the interest of each person to help others establish and maintain face.⁶⁰ Face concerns, i.e., the potential for acceptance or rejection of one's face, underlie every interaction and function to constrain interactional choices.⁶¹

Concerns for face address the relational dimension of communication through helping others establish and maintain face. Face work also serves the content dimension of communication in two ways. First, many content-dimension acts such as making requests can threaten the face needs of one or both interactants and thus require some form of mitigation to lessen the threat potential. Second, face concerns may be explicitly addressed in an attempt to further communicative goals.

Brown and Levinson invoked Durkheim's concept of negative and positive rites (that is, rites that protect or align the individual, respectively) in positing at least two face orientations or needs that must be managed as part of any interaction.⁶² Negative face is "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others."⁶³ Harris describes negative face as "an individual's basic claim to territories, personal preserves, self-determination,"⁶⁴ while Duthler identifies the need or desire to be left alone and independent of others.⁶⁵ Behavior addressing another's negative face is commonly associated with Western notions of politeness or deference.⁶⁶

Positive face, according to Brown and Levinson, is "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others."⁶⁷ Westbrook describes positive face as consisting of the values and characteristics put forward in order to connect with others.⁶⁸ Lim and Bowers identify two dimensions of positive face: the need for appreciation expressed through inclusion or belongingness and the need for approval expressed by respect for one's abilities.⁶⁹ Scollon and Scollon refer to positive politeness as *solidarity politeness* because these strategies emphasize common ground between the interactants.⁷⁰

In essence, humans are social beings who need both autonomy and belongingness in differing degrees, according to the contexts in which they find themselves. Every utterance in an interaction carries with it the potential to create a threat to either the speaker's or hearer's negative or positive face and as such comprises a face threatening act (FTA). Examples of potential FTAs include requests for information or help, advice, criticism, etc.⁷¹ Let's consider a simple request for information of the kind seen every day at library reference desks.

A patron approaches the reference desk to ask for assistance. Asking for help represents a direct threat to that person's autonomy or ability to act with agency, i.e. a negative face threat. The patron's positive face can also be threatened if the librarian fails to display interest in the request or the request is rejected outright. Simultaneously, the librarian might be engaged in another task, and this request could impinge upon her/his autonomy or negative face. The same utterance can also be viewed as supporting the positive face of the librarian, who is in the position to offer the help requested. Negative and positive face coexist in a delicate balance; the threat to one kind of face can be seen as direct support for the other kind of face.⁷²

Interactants are rational actors in Brown and Levinson's model, since they can, and are motivated to, calculate the inherent risk of an FTA, then take remedial action that reduces or minimizes the threat to the other's face through the expression of the FTA.⁷³ The degree of potential face threat for any utterance is based upon the perceived social distance between the speaker and hearer, the power of the speaker in relationship to the hearer, and the imposition of the act.⁷⁴ Interactants use this knowledge when selecting from a set of "super strategies" used in crafting an utterance to manage FTAs. First, speakers can elect to perform an act baldly or on record. This is the clearest form of communication but can be so blunt as to be rude; hence, it is the least polite of the super strategies and only occurs when efficiency is of paramount importance.⁷⁵ Second, speakers can perform the FTA using positive politeness strategies that address the hearer's need for belonging or to be seen as desirable to others. Third, speakers can use negative politeness strategies to mitigate the FTA, such as utterances acknowledging, or demonstrating respect for, the hearer's autonomy. Fourth, speakers can perform the FTA by using off-record strategies such as hints,

placing the interpretive burden upon the hearer rather than on the speaker. Finally, speakers can choose to remain silent, not performing the FTA at all. These super strategies are arrayed along a continuum from most direct/least polite to least direct/most polite.⁷⁶ Speakers choose a politeness super strategy from the continuum, aware that they sacrifice directness for politeness as the weight of the FTA increases.⁷⁷

Much of the examination of Brown and Levinson's politeness model has focused on face work directed towards others at the expense of self-directed face work.⁷⁸ This makes sense given Brown and Levinson's focus on the speaker's need to manage FTAs directed at a hearer. However, both speakers and hearers have positive and negative face needs that have to be managed simultaneously during any interaction. Holtgraves indicates that a threat to another's face can simultaneously threaten one's own face.⁷⁹ Conversely, an FTA such as a request, which can threaten a hearer's negative face, can also pose a threat to the speaker's positive face if the request is rejected. Paying too much attention to one type of face can threaten the other face.⁸⁰ An act can also threaten both kinds of face simultaneously.⁸¹ FTAs can be conveyed over a sequence of utterances, and any given utterance can serve relational and/or instrumental goals.⁸²

Politeness in Face-to-Face Reference

While Brown and Levinson examine individual moves, they do so with the intent of developing a pan-cultural theory of politeness.⁸³ They identify negative- and positive-politeness cultures based upon cultural norms regarding power differences and social distance.⁸⁴ Positive-politeness cultures feature lower power and social distance between interactants, while negative-politeness cultures emphasize greater power and social distance between interactants.

The United States is a negative-politeness culture. The reference desk setting reflects this orientation through the high power differences that exist between the librarian as the information expert and the patron as an information novice. The academic setting emphasizes high social distance, with the librarian as a highly educated professional and the patron, often a student, acquiring educational credentials. The library profession has tried to move the reference encounter towards a positive-politeness orientation, emphasizing lower power and social distance between the interactants to promote high involvement and solidarity.

Librarians have to manage the tensions of competing politeness orientations.

One way of managing competing politeness orientations is to consider politeness from a macro perspective. Individuals may have preferred orientations that influence their interactions with others. Scollon and Scollon point out that some people are naturally voluble and willing to engage with others in a way that reflects belonging needs (a positive politeness orientation). Others are more taciturn and less willing to engage with other people, preferring independence and autonomy (both negative politeness needs).⁸⁵

Holtgraves posits a “specificity principle,” according to which the politest strategy is the one that orients to the threat faced by the person (patron) with whom one is interacting.⁸⁶ At the macro level, this means identifying the preferred face orientation of the user and selecting politeness strategies that support this orientation. The preferred face orientation is often revealed within the patron’s opening moves, especially in accounts that explain or justify the patron’s use of reference help. Consider the following hypothetical interaction illustrating a negative-politeness orientation (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Reference Encounter

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| 01 Patron: | Is this the place where I can get help with a question? |
| 02 Librarian: | Yes it is. How can I help you? |
| 03 Patron: | My professor sent me to get help finding some articles. |
| 04 Librarian: | What kind of articles do you need to find? |
| 05 Patron: | Scholarly ones. |
| 06 Librarian: | What information should the articles contain? |
| 07 Patron: | Stuff on the history of rock and roll. |
| 08 Librarian: | That should not be too hard to find. |

The patron’s utterance in turn 01 is a pre-request, or a move used to ascertain whether conditions are safe for a request to be made.⁸⁷ The patron shows deference, which minimizes the possible FTA of a request to the librarian’s negative face. The pre-request also insulates the patron’s positive face from a potential refusal by testing the waters of the transaction. In turn 02, the librarian answers the patron’s literal question before addressing the implicit request for help. People view replies that

address the direct or literal meanings before responding to the implied request as significantly more polite than responses that address only the implicit request.⁸⁸ The librarian’s second response orients to the implicit request for help and to the patron’s positive face, displaying solidarity.

The macro-level politeness orientation of the patron is apparent in turn 03, where an account is provided to justify the request for help. In stating that an authority figure (a professor) directed the patron to go to the reference desk, the patron is disclaiming responsibility for the FTA of requesting assistance. Implicit in the statement is the inference that the patron would not otherwise willingly have come to the reference desk. Individuals with strongly developed negative-face orientations value autonomy, asking for help only when they see no alternatives available. These individuals do not actively participate in the reference interview, and their “negative attitude” is often blamed by librarians for the failure of a reference encounter.⁸⁹

The move in turn 03 provides a clear example of negative face on the part of the patron. Using the specificity principle as a guide, the librarian needs to acknowledge and respect the patron’s negative face. This situation is complicated by the fact that offers of assistance are inherently threatening to the recipient’s negative face.⁹⁰ The librarian minimizes the FTA in turn 08 by asserting that the request for help can be satisfied with minimal effort and, by extension, minimal imposition.

There are patrons who bring a positive-face orientation to the reference encounter as their preferred style. Consider the following hypothetical interaction displaying positive face (See Figure 2).

This reference transaction begins in the same manner as shown in Figure 1, with a pre-request initiated by the patron and the librarian’s response to the literal question preceding the indirect request for

Figure 2. Reference Encounter

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| 01 Patron: | Are you busy? |
| 02 Librarian: | No. How can I help you? |
| 03 Patron: | I’ve been searching for hours and found some good stuff. I just need a few more articles to complete my paper. |
| 04 Librarian: | What kind of articles are you looking for? |
| 05 Patron: | Articles on the history of rock and roll music. |
| 06 Librarian: | Let’s see what we can find. |

help. The account provided by the patron in turn 03 acknowledges the expectation of self-help associated with academic libraries,⁹¹ while also emphasizing the patron's personal need for several more articles. The patron displays solidarity with the librarian through personal involvement in the paper and a willingness to ask for help. The librarian's move in turn 06 recognizes this positive politeness by using inclusive language (*We* versus *I*), suggesting the search will be accomplished together as a team.

A macro view of politeness can guide the reference interaction by identifying the preferred face orientation used by the patron. Politeness theory also requires understanding how specific utterances can function as FTAs and how to mitigate the face threat potential of these acts. This understanding is crucial, since each move is a potential threat to either the patron's or the librarian's face. Requests, questions, offers of assistance, and criticism are FTAs commonly found in reference encounters. These FTAs are described below along with strategies to mitigate their potential threats to face.

Face Threatening Acts and Their Mitigation

Requests threaten the recipient's negative face by limiting autonomy or independence.⁹² The face threat of requests can be mitigated by the speaker through acknowledging the intrusion (e.g., apologizing or showing how small the imposition will be) or using indirect speech that allows the recipient the opportunity to ignore or refuse the request.⁹³

When the librarian is the recipient of a request, her/his positive face is enhanced through the opportunity to offer assistance. Librarians have many different linguistic strategies available for offering/providing assistance, including giving advice. Giving advice can threaten the recipient's negative face by constraining autonomy.⁹⁴ At the same time, advice can threaten positive face by implying the recipient would not act wisely without it.⁹⁵ The face threat of advice giving can be managed by showing how the advice is in the best interest of the recipient and by minimizing the directness of the advice given.⁹⁶

Questions pose issues for face separate from their content. Massey-Burzio points out that library patrons dislike asking questions out of fear they might appear ignorant.⁹⁷ In this case, question-asking threatens the patron's positive-face need for involvement. The reference interview is designed to elicit informa-

tion from the patron, and this is accomplished most often through questions posed by the librarian. How questions are asked also influences their face threat potential. Open-ended questions avoid negative face threats by allowing a recipient freedom to respond, whereas closed or pointed questions threaten negative face by restricting action.⁹⁸

One of the most problematic FTAs is posed by criticism, whether explicit or perceived. Explicit criticism correlates with Goffman's concept of *expressions given* and perceived criticism with *expressions given off*.⁹⁹ Expressions given are under the control of the speaker and as such are on record. Explicit criticism threatens the recipient's negative and positive face. Negative face is threatened through the inference that the behavior being critiqued ought to change.¹⁰⁰ This impinges upon the autonomy of the recipient. Positive face is threatened as criticism challenges the abilities of the recipient,¹⁰¹ and it threatens the desire for approval.¹⁰²

Expressions given off are more problematic as face threats because they are not necessarily under the conscious control of the speaker. Nonverbal communication can convey both criticism and politeness.¹⁰³ Patrons are acutely aware of the gentle sigh or the upward glance of the eyes on the part of the reference librarian who doesn't think much of the question being asked but has no idea of the nonverbal cues that are giving off expressions of disapproval. The Library Visit Study has demonstrated the sensitivity of users to perceived verbal and nonverbal criticisms.¹⁰⁴

The preference in the academic library for patrons to engage in self-help first contributes to the potential for criticism. Massey-Burzio points out that users assume that they ought to be capable of doing research in a library, and they could be subject to censure if they fail to do so.¹⁰⁵ Straightforward questions like "What have you already done?" or "Where have you looked so far?" can suggest a lack of effort by the patron. This threatens the patron's negative face ("You had the freedom to do this, but didn't,") and positive face ("You don't belong here, since you've broken the rules").

Politeness in Other Reference Modalities

Politeness is an important feature of FtF reference transactions. Although telephonic, e-mail, and chat or instant message (IM) channels have different features from FtF communication, research demonstrates that politeness is a vital component of these channels.¹⁰⁶

Visual cues are missing from telephonic reference transactions. However, the nonverbal cues of paralanguage, filled pauses, and voice intonation remain part of the interaction and are used to communicate and to infer meaning. Both open-ended and closed questions can be used more extensively than in the FtF reference encounter, since questions are used to create and fill in contextual information that is normally a part of the visual dimension.

E-mail reference differs from the other reference modalities, since the nonverbal channel is mostly absent and the communication is asynchronous. The give and take of interaction is absent, which means the conventional reference interview does not readily occur. The asynchronous nature of e-mail allows interactants to reflect on what they have written and make changes before sending the message.¹⁰⁷ Both politeness strategies and accounts are used in e-mail transactions.¹⁰⁸

Chat or IM reference is both synchronous and instant and develops in the same way that FtF interaction unfolds through turn taking. Even though nonverbal cues are mostly absent, politeness strategies are used in the chat medium. Westbrook points out that librarians often provide running commentaries on their search process.¹⁰⁹ This serves to provide the information normally conveyed visually. Explanations can include moves designed to address FTAs such as apologies ("Sorry, I'm still searching for it,") and outright rejections of requests ("I'm sorry, but you have to be a student or staff member to access this database").

The channels used to conduct reference transactions have different structures in terms of technical communication, but the negative and positive face needs of both patrons and librarians remain constant and must be attended to as part of the reference communication.

Conclusion

Librarians are polite people, both by nature and by training. Politeness influences both the relational and content dimensions of communication, as polite interactions result in increased patron satisfaction. The increases in patron self-disclosure associated with increased satisfaction improve the efficiency and accuracy of the reference transaction. That this works is well established in the reference literature, but not in terms of *how* or *why*. Politeness theory and its ante-

cedent, face work, provide the theoretical underpinnings that can both account for behaviors and explain their probable trajectories and outcomes along the content and relational dimensions that underlie all communicative interactions, including reference encounters.

This study has briefly outlined the tenets of politeness theory and positioned them within the context of FtF reference encounters. Specific strategies commonly used in reference encounters were examined in terms of their face threat potential, and strategies to mitigate the face threats were identified. Several non-FtF reference modalities (telephone, e-mail, and chat or IM reference) were considered in terms of politeness management.

The patron and the librarian each bring their negative and positive face needs to the reference transaction. Understanding how these face needs function and at times clash is important, along with knowing how moves made in real-time interaction can influence the qualities of interactions in polite ways. We echo Westbrook's call to include reference training in politeness theory for librarians.¹¹⁰ Let's face it: Reference work and politeness theory go hand in hand.

Notes

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