Chapter 8

Discussion of Findings

The results reported in chapters 5, 6, and 7 demonstrate that a communication-centered approach to the reference encounter provides rich insights into the interpersonal dynamics between librarian and user not found in traditional librarian performance studies. Utilizing Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, and Don D. Jackson’s perspective enabled an exploration of this encounter in terms of its content and relational dimensions. This chapter discusses the major and ancillary findings for each of the three analytical perspectives used in this study:

- the development of the outline of categories;
- the critical incident analysis;
- the analysis of paired perceptions.

The user–librarian interactions explored in this study revealed a high level of complexity. Even the simplest instance of human communication has an intricate structure, and the nature of the reference interview adds to this complexity. Richard L. Street noted that in all types of interview situations:

> The question–answer sequence and power/status differences between participants impose greater constraints on interactants’ verbal, vocal, and nonverbal behaviors than is often evident in conversational settings.

Each of the perspectives for analyzing this study’s data provided evidence of these constraints and accompanying complexity.
It is important to remember that this study recognizes the vital importance of providing accurate reference service. However, it did not seek to measure whether users received “the right answer” to their reference queries. Instead, the analysis sought to discover librarian–user perceptions of interactions and to identify the qualities that were critical in their evaluation of these interactions.

Major Findings
The major findings were as follows:

- Interpersonal relationships and communication are of great importance in librarian and user perceptions of reference interactions.
- Library users in academic settings place a high degree of significance on the attitude and personal qualities of the librarian giving reference assistance.
- Some users valued interpersonal aspects more than their receipt of information.
- Librarians were more likely than users to evaluate the reference encounter from content dimensions that involve the transfer of information.
- Librarians also perceive relationship qualities to be important in the success of reference interactions (although to a lesser degree than users).

The following section organizes and discusses the findings in relation to the study’s four research questions.

Perceptions of Relational Dimensions
Research question 1 asked: What are the perceptions of the participants regarding the relational dimensions of communication between librarian and library user in the reference encounter?

The critical incident analysis found that relational factors were primary in thirty-five (74%) of the forty-seven positive and negative incidents. This finding emphasizes the importance of relational dimensions to both librarians and users in assessing reference interactions. For users, especially, relational dimensions determine success or failure in twenty-eight (85%) of thirty-three critical incidents (see chapter 6).

The large variety of relational themes developed in the outline of categories, as well as in the findings of the analysis of paired perceptions
and critical incidents, suggested that there are multiple librarian–user perceptions regarding relational aspects. These deal with a wide range of emotional, affect-oriented dimensions. Some of these reveal basic emotional responses to perceptions of positive attitudes such as friendliness, honesty, patience, and respect, or negative attitudes such as fear, impatience, hostility, or insecurity. The full range of relational categories that emerged from the data are given under facilitators and barriers for both librarians and users. A few of these categories are explored to illustrate their complexity and to provide in-depth discussion of underlying relational aspects that may be present in reference interactions that can have a positive or negative impact on their outcome.

**Honesty/Deception/Self-disclosure**

One example of relational factors that have an impact on the interaction was positive perceptions of self-disclosure and openness or negative perceptions of deception or lack of self-disclosure. One librarian voiced an appreciation of two users for being open and forthright: “He was willing to reveal what the question was” (L06/U05) and “I think it went okay, I think she was up front about what it was that she wanted” (L06/U21). A related relational aspect is the user’s willingness to trust the librarian. As one librarian said:

I guess the willingness to trust the librarian, whether it be a confidential matter or just something that they weren’t really comfortable talking about, because I think that’s the whole problem with the reference interview—well, one of the problems—a lot of times the user comes up and doesn’t really say what they want. Usually it starts out as a very general, broad subject, and then you find out they’re really looking for a very specific piece of information. (L03)

The reason for such ambiguity or perhaps lack of self-disclosure by users was not known. At times, librarians perceived users to be ambiguous if they were unable to articulate their need. This was expressed by one librarian: “Maybe they don’t have the ability to actually phrase the question” (L03). Another explanation might be that they are not aware of the precise nature of their information need.4
At other times, the user may have withheld some information or been deliberately deceptive. Several librarians speculated on these possibilities and discussed their negative impact on the reference interaction. In these cases, the user was perceived either to have been a surrogate, doing the research for another person, or to have disguised the question for some reason, perhaps embarrassment or pretense. One librarian discussed instances when a form of surrogate user was encountered:

The most obvious one is the parent that actually will accompany the child. This usually happens in the public library environment, but due to the fact that this library does draw in a lot of the public, high school [students], I consider that perhaps a deception in the sense that the parent will speak on behalf of the child, even though I make it distinctly evident [by] my gestures. . . that I am trying to communicate with the person who will ultimately have to be the recipient of the knowledge and that sometimes the interaction is not winnable, and as such, I basically target the parent in the scenario as the person who is going to be on the receiving end of the knowledge that I am hopefully to impart. I guess that’s a form of deception in a sense. (L02)

One of the most fascinating instances of deception involved a user who was perceived to be acting as a surrogate in researching background information for a take-home final examination for another student. The librarian commented:

Evidently, he must be doing it for a [this site] student because I know it’s an assignment that’s given here, it’s a course that [this site] offers and I don’t think that it’s duplicated at his college. . . . I didn’t ask him directly but I, just judging from what the other students who had this assignment did when they came in the library, which is not to approach us at all, they were all at the card catalog trying to work on their own . . . so it seemed to me that they had parameters that they were working with. And it’s interesting that since we suspect that he might not have been working under those parameters, ‘cause he’s really the only one who
came up and had like kinda in-depth conversation about this assignment. . . . I know a lot of students come in and sometimes when I ask them a few questions about their assignments, they say, “Oh I don’t know. I’m doing it for someone else.” So then I say, “It’s not really helpful for them if you’re doing it,” but it happens. (L05)

Several indications suggested that this user was being deceptive. One was that he said he was a student at another college, but the librarian knew that the assignment was from a professor at the site. Also, he did not understand the assignment, whereas other students with the same assignment did not have this difficulty. Although this surrogacy/deception was suspected, the user did not admit it, nor did the librarian ask. Perhaps the user was deceptive because the assignment was a take-home exam in which seeking “help” with research might not have been acceptable. It was also noteworthy that the librarian had encountered “a lot” of students who admitted they were doing research for others.

Lack of self-disclosure was also related to privacy issues. For example, in the case of the user who was disguising the question because the topic was of a sensitive or personal nature:

The patron does not necessarily want to reveal the fact that he or she is preparing for a job interview and so the question will come . . . in a traditional company-specific question . . . or a search for statistics. But by a series of questions and the answers that the patron gives, it comes to the point that, yes indeed, the patron needs to secure information about a specific industry because he or she is preparing for an interview for a specific company. (L02)

Another librarian discussed the phenomenon of users asking questions that are disguised:

Sometimes people know what they want but ask for something else thinking that you know this is the question that they should be asking, and then they’ll find what they want. I don’t know . . . maybe they think their . . . own question is too revealing at
first, I don't know, because I was reading an article in the *New York Times* about doctor–patient interactions and they said that the third question is usually the real question . . . and that the first two questions are sort of like feeling the ground and that doctors often don't even get to the third question and that was a problem. (L05)

Lack of self-disclosure and/or deception in reference interactions is an interesting relational aspect because it has a profound impact on the outcome of the interaction. Often a librarian is unable to help a user with an information need because the user may not be knowledgeable enough about the question to guide the librarian’s efforts. In the case of a sensitive issue, the user may be deliberately withholding information that the librarian needs. Something similar can also happen in the case of the honest research assistant sent by a professor to find a piece of information in the library. The assistant does not have the specialized knowledge about the query that the professor would have. If it becomes necessary for the research assistant to interact with a librarian, he or she may be unable to explain or elaborate on the initial request. In such cases, the user creates an additional relational barrier that may prevent the librarian from understanding the user’s need and thus preclude a successful outcome for the interaction.

Marilyn Markham, Keith H. Stirling, and Nathan M. Smith studied self-disclosure in the reference interaction, but they focused on the librarians. They found that user comfort and satisfaction were positively affected by librarian self-disclosure, that “librarian self-disclosure was significantly correlated to the feeling that the interview was warm, friendly, and interesting.” They also found that there was more self-disclosure on the part of the user than the librarian. Markham, Stirling, and Smith recommended additional research in this area and posed the following questions as possible research directions:

Why do patrons self-disclose more and how much more? Do they do so because they are in a position of weakness and uncertainty? Do they self-disclose in a subconscious effort to obtain self-disclosure and sympathy/warmth from the librarian? And perhaps the most fascinating question is, What
effect does patron self-disclosure have on the librarian's perception of the patron/interview and on his own self-disclosure?  

**Fear**

Another illustration of relational dimensions is the barrier of fear. Users and librarians both perceived that users may approach the reference interview with some degree of fear. This may be generalized from a fear of the library or librarian as a representative of a depersonalized institution. One student, when asked if he thought librarians were scary said, “Not librarians, I think the library is” (U20). One librarian said:

> The kid who comes here, in many instances, is the first person in their family ever to go away to school . . . and there’s a lot of fear just of the institution, the place itself, and so they may be reticent and they’re afraid they are going to show their inadequacies. (L01)

It was also possible, according to this librarian, that fear may have been due to a negative interaction with a librarian or with a stereotypical female authority figure in the user’s past:

> It could be that they didn’t have a very good relationship with other women in the past . . . in authority. It could be a principal, it could be a schoolteacher, it could be their mother, it could be anybody that they just see standing there. (L01)

Users and librarians both mentioned that the user may fear looking stupid or being a bother to the librarian. One user commented: “first of all, like going in just asking makes me feel dumb” (U14). Alternatively, if users are acting as surrogates, or practicing deception, as discussed above, they may fear being discovered or unmasked. Erving Goffman’s concept of the impression management and “face” is useful here. Goffman defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself . . . an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes.”

Reference interactions generally seem to be very threatening to the user’s “face.” This provides one explanation for the fear users have ex-
pressed of looking stupid in the eyes of the librarian, or perhaps in the eyes of other students who may also be waiting for help at the reference desk. In the case of deception, using Goffman’s terminology, the user has put forth the “line” that he or she is a student working on his or her own assignment. Therefore, the user fears being “in wrong face” if the truth is discovered and the line is found to be false. If the user is caught, “he is likely to feel ashamed and inferior.”

Users and librarians also reported that many students tend to procrastinate and come to the library to work on a class assignment shortly before it is due. For the student, this adds elements of stress and fear that the assignment will not be done on time. One typical user said: “I was worried that I wasn’t gonna get this done by today, which [is when] I need it, [I] leave things for the last minute” (U19). As the semester of data collection progressed, the level of activity and stress at the reference desk increased. In response to this stress, librarians reported becoming more focused on quickly finding information that was available at the site. During the earlier parts of the semester, interlibrary loan and visits by users to other sites were possible, but by the end of the semester, the push was to get something into the users’ hands immediately:

What was important to me always at this point is that I help these kids find something ‘cause they’re feeling so desperate and I feel desperate if I haven’t been able to come up with one or two pieces of something for them (L07/U17).

This librarian clearly had empathy for users’ feelings of desperation and reacted with increased effort on the users’ behalf. Similarly, understanding that users may be experiencing feelings of fear in approaching the reference interview may help librarians to work toward overcoming this barrier.

Attraction
One librarian described a barrier to success in an interaction in which he was physically attracted to the user. Here, a male librarian was attracted to a female student and felt that this interfered with his ability to answer the reference question:
The reason I guess I was not happy with the reference interview was because I felt as though I was not expressing myself smoothly, you know. Usually I complete my sentences and have a coherent statement, whereas this time I was kind of garbling things a bit and maybe because . . . {clears throat} this is kind of embarrassing to confess, but it happens and maybe it would be interesting for your research. Let’s say you’re a heterosexual, which is what I am, and if you’re attracted to the patron, it kind of throws you off sometimes because the hormones interfere with the job {laugh} so I think that’s what was happening . . . it interferes with your work . . . you can’t help but be affected and distracted, you know. (L04)

When asked if he would changed anything if given the chance to go back and do it again, the librarian replied:

Well, if I could control my, you know, that eroticism, it would be better but, you know, we’re human beings . . . you can’t necessarily crush that, you know, [you] can only control it to a point, so . . . yeah, maybe I’m more disciplined, maybe when I grow a little older I’ll slow down more, and it, and I’ll be a better reference librarian because of that. (L04)

This was noteworthy because the researcher was unable to find any reference in the library literature to the effects of sexual or interpersonal attraction on the reference interaction. However, there is literature that explores this topic within other professions (e.g., therapist–client\textsuperscript{14} and nurse–patient).\textsuperscript{15}

This excerpt also gave evidence that a high level of trust was established between the researcher and informant. Because this was an obviously embarrassing and personal admission, the librarian must have had a sufficiently high level of trust to “confess,” to use the librarian’s word, these feelings. Also, this librarian had a high regard for the research being undertaken, as the informant said above: “. . . it happens and maybe it would be interesting for your research.”

These examples of deception, fear, and attraction illustrate the range and complexity of the perceptions associated with relational dimensions
in the librarian–user interaction. Heretofore, in the library literature is-
sues of affect were rarely investigated empirically. This study demonstrates
that affect has a major impact on the reference encounter.

**Relative Importance of Relational versus Content Dimensions**

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

Relational dimensions were very important to library users in deter-
moving perceptions of success and failure in interactions. The outline of
categories showed that users and librarians discussed relational concerns
with greater frequency than content factors. However, analysis of paired
perceptions and critical incidents found that librarians gave more weight
to content dimensions in their assessment of success or failure of interac-
tions. At the same time, those analyses showed that relational qualities
were also important to librarians.

As mentioned previously, in the development of the category outline,
three major themes were derived from the data:

- goals or aims of the interaction;
- facilitators: qualities that enhance goals, communication;
- barriers: characteristics that impede goals, communication.

Goals or aims of the interaction are important because the reference
interview is considered to be goal-directed communication. Charles R.
Berger and Patrick diBattista have noted that:

> Increasing numbers of interpersonal communication researchers
> have found it useful to view social interaction processes from a
> strategic, goal-directed perspective.\(^\text{16}\)

To begin to understand the process, it was vital to consider the
goals of the informants. The librarians and users both agreed that one
goal of this type of interaction was to provide an exchange of inform-
\[\text{ation.}\]^\text{17} All were interested in solving an information problem or
meeting an information need. However, the category outline had a
fuller and more diversified range of goals for librarians than for the
users. All of the librarians mentioned two or more goals for the inter-
action, whereas most users specified only one goal. Also, the librar-
ians had additional goals that were not voiced by all users. These goals dealt with:

- *problem definition*, understanding the user’s question;
- *enablement*, helping the user learn to become more independent in library use.

Nine librarians had problem definition as a goal, seven mentioned developing strategies for solving the problem and six discussed enablement. Only two librarians mentioned relational goals that dealt with gaining the user’s confidence and developing positive attitude toward library program besides the information-oriented goals.

Users, by contrast, had one primary goal developing strategies for solving the problem. Only two users, both of whom were graduate students, reported the goal enablement. This suggests that, for the most part, users were not concerned with going beyond their immediate need to complete the assignment at hand. The data further showed that librarians were also interested in providing instruction so that the users could become more independent. One librarian commented on this:

> Somebody comes to the desk, they ask a question—well half of them are in a panic . . . they’re not interested in the options, they’re not really interested in learning how to use the library, they just want the quickest way in and the quickest way out. And even though I’m trying to squeeze in certain things, they’re not absorbing it and it’s a little frustrating. . . . If they had come in earlier and were more willing to put more into it, maybe they would be better off. (L09)

The conflict in goals was apparent here. It appeared that librarians were far more concerned with future library use and teaching the mechanics of the search process (note the reference to “trying to squeeze in certain things”). For comparison, the academic user wants to “find it [the information] quickly, as soon as possible so I can get done with it.” (U15)

Users and librarians were not operating with the same goals in the interaction. If users and librarians do not understand each other’s perspective with relation to goals, they are working at cross-purposes, which contributes to frustration on both sides. One user perceived that the librarian was unwilling to help:
Yeah, some librarians are really sour and they're like “Why don't you do your own research?” . . . Once I called up [county library] and I needed the definition of one lousy word, and she was like “Well, you know, I’m not doing your research for you.” (U10)

Perhaps the librarians’ goal of enablement was in conflict here with the user’s search for information. If the goal was to instruct users on how to do their own research, the librarian may have felt he or she would be doing the student a disfavor by “doing the research for you.” Some users find this frustrating because they feel that if they knew how to find the information, they would not ask for the librarian’s help. Several users reported that they always tried to find the information themselves before approaching the reference librarian. A typical user commented:

I only ask a librarian for help when I cannot find it myself . . . when I’m stuck on a certain subject or a certain aspect of my subject, then I go and ask her . . . If I know where it is, why should I bother her? I mean she’s here only if I absolutely, necessarily need her. (U18)

Evidence, such as the above comment, shows that users are concerned with their self-esteem and also do not want to “bother” the librarian. Given this, it is also interesting to note the almost total absence of relational concerns in the goal statements of both librarians and users. This finding provided evidence that librarians were not fully conscious of the possibility that the users might have been concerned about the interpersonal components of the interaction. It also shows that users may not be aware that they may have relational goals in addition to the goal of obtaining information or may not be able to articulate these goals. Sample goals for librarians that exemplify relational concerns might be to establish a positive relationship with the user; or to have a successful interpersonal encounter.

An important finding in the development of the category outline was that although users and librarians agreed that information transfer was the goal of reference, both discussed relational factors with greater frequency and in more detail than content dimensions. This was true for both facilitators and barriers. Participants’ perceptions of relational as-
pects greatly influenced the success or failure of the interaction. Although librarians and users perceived the interaction to center on solving an information need, interpersonal factors entered their evaluation of the outcome.

A major finding in the analysis of paired perceptions was that users, much more frequently than librarians, reported that relational concerns were critical to the success or failure of the interaction. Librarians discussed content themes in recounting twenty (74%) of twenty-seven interactions (see chapter 7). Among successful interactions, librarians described content aspects in seventeen (85%) of twenty. In contrast, for users, eighteen (72%) of twenty-five successful interactions were categorized as relational in nature. In short, users stressed relational aspects and librarians focused on content themes.

The critical incident analysis (chapter 6) also found that users described relationally centered incidents with greater frequency than did librarians. Twenty-eight (85%) of the users’ thirty-three reports focused on relational themes compared to seven (50%) of the librarians’ fourteen. However, among unsuccessful incidents, librarians attributed more to relational dimensions than to content dimensions (five to three). This was an important finding because it suggests that, in some circumstances at least, librarians can be affected significantly by relational factors.

Given traditional standards for reference, librarians would be expected to judge failure of interactions based on unsuccessful information transfer. Indeed, in the paired perceptions analysis, librarians focused more on content than relational dimensions. Instead, this finding of the critical incident analysis provides evidence that relational factors were important to librarians. An alternative explanation might be that librarians did not want to talk about interactions in which their reference skills were inadequate. Instead, they chose to speak of times when the user was at fault in being angry or uncooperative. The researcher considered this alternative, but it was also possible that these incidents were the first to come to the librarians’ minds during the interviews or that memories that have a strong affective component may most easily be recalled. In any event, it appears that librarians retain their relational recollections, especially those that were unpleasant, longer than their content ones.

The analysis of paired perceptions revealed that librarians and users differed about the importance of relational versus content dimensions. Although forty-five (83%) of the fifty-four reports described the interac-
tions as successful, only eleven (41%) out of twenty-seven pairs were in total agreement as to the factors that contributed to this success. The remaining sixteen librarian–user pairs disagreed about the aspects of the interaction that were important to success or failure.

The differences between the perceptions of librarians and users were either partial or total. In the category of partial agreement, in nine out of ten cases users attributed success to relational factors (most often related to the librarian's attitude or to relationship quality), whereas librarians credited success to content factors (most often related to information). In cases of total disagreement, librarians perceived four out of six cases to be centered on content whereas users focused on the relational.

Librarians in total disagreement with their user partners tended to be more negative about the interaction's outcome than users. Librarians assessed as failures three cases that users perceived to be successful. In these interactions, the information requested was not found, but the user perceived the interaction to be successful because of relational dimensions.

In contrast, librarians based their assessments of success on content factors alone, so “information not found equals failure.” Only one user perceived an interaction to be unsuccessful. This user attributed the failure to relational components, not content. Benita J. Howell, Edward B. Reeves and John van Willigen similarly reported that librarians tended to rate their level of performance less favorably than did users. Patricia Dewdney, in a study of users of public libraries, also found that users consistently rate service to be very high. She offered one explanation for this: that users had little knowledge of the library and are impressed by the librarian's efforts regardless of effectiveness. Another, rather disturbing, explanation could be that users have low expectations for library service and so are pleased with any help they receive.

The analysis of paired perceptions offered evidence that librarians concentrate more than users on content dimensions in the reference encounter. Invariably, each librarian told the researcher step by step the process and procedures used to find the information. Interpersonal aspects were discussed very briefly, if at all. Some librarians described the interaction in such detail (for example, the mechanics of a computer search) that the interviewer had to ask them to condense. To get any response from most of the librarians regarding relational factors, the researcher often had to ask probing questions such as How about the interper-
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sonal aspects? A typical librarian’s description of an interaction was as follows:

Okay, he was looking for information on [x group] as I remember, but he wanted a very small, specific subsidiary which that name escapes me right now . . . but he knew that was a pretty recent subsidiary, so he wasn’t sure how much information would be there. So I started looking our, through just our general reference books and I wasn’t finding what we knew was, it was some kind of financial corporation, and they had just acquired [hotel chains]. So anyway, we were checking in Moody’s and Standard & Poors and we were finding [x] entries but not [company x] group, so I started [getting] a little worried. So I came up to the ready reference area and looked in the Million Dollar Directory and one of the others, and we actually did find [it]. I just wanted to make sure that what we were looking for actually existed and it was under the right name. I . . . was trying to figure out whether it was a public or private company, it didn’t have the little symbol for public. I was, I told him about Compact Disclosure which . . . is a CD-Rom product . . . but it would only be really for public companies. Well, during our whole process it was never actually free . . . then I decided that we should go into periodical literature and I was going to show him the [laugh] Business Periodicals Index, but I decided we could try Infotrac ‘cause it seemed like it might have general information, but I didn’t realize that they had loaded the Business Index on . . . to that machine, I was like “Oh, this is perfect,” so he went in there, so it was like the business Infotrac and he found a lot. I think he found a lot of good information. He basically, wanted to just read up on, this was an interview-type thing, he just wanted to find out as much information as he could. . . . (L03)

This description continued for a few more paragraphs and exemplifies the level of specificity of some librarians’ recollections. It also showed the attention given to the content dimension—in this case, the search for information. Possibly this librarian and others were attempting to dem-
onstrate their expertise to the researcher by giving detailed explanations of their search strategy. In contrast, the user simply described the interaction:

Well, I was looking for information on a company . . . trying to find out a little background on a particular company. . . . She helped me find a company reference which included employee information, gross sales. They recently acquired a couple of other companies so I was trying to find a little background, got into the periodicals. She showed me how the computer . . . to look up those references . . . showed me how to get to the periodicals after I found them {laugh}. (U08)

The user’s very brief account is a far cry from the detail of the librarian. This user, atypically, did not get into the relational aspects of the interaction. Normally, users combined content with relational dimensions. For example:

Well, she directed me to where I could find a reference book on the person that I’m looking for and she stayed with me a couple minutes and discussed, you know, how to go about looking for this person. Unfortunately, I couldn’t find him . . . Well, she tried to help as much as she could . . . you know, I felt comfortable with the what she was telling me. (U11)

User 11 gave a brief description of the content aspect of the interaction, but when asked how it went gave the relational information that “I felt comfortable.” When prompted with the same question, librarians consistently gave their assessment of the quality of the information exchange.

Relational Dimensions Critical to Librarians and Library Users
Research question 3 asked: What aspects of the relational dimensions of communication are judged to be of critical importance by librarians and library users in reference encounters?

Three categories of relational dimensions emerged for users and librarians under the themes of facilitators and barriers:

- attitude;
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- relationship quality;
- approachability.

These themes appeared to be vitally important in the analysis of the outline of categories, paired perceptions, and the critical incidents. Because the same informants provided the critical incidents as well as the paired perceptions, it is not surprising that similar elements would be present in their recollection and discussion.

In the category outline, under librarians’ perceptions of positive user characteristics, relationship quality is more fully developed than attitude. The most critical factor in relationship quality appears to be user enthusiasm or interest, which was mentioned by eight librarians. Also important was good communication skills, especially the user’s willingness to be open and direct. Under attitude, more librarians discussed the user’s positive attitude toward task than the user’s positive attitude toward librarian. Librarians described as important to users’ success their being serious, motivated, assertive, and persistent. This description contrasted with users who gave greater emphasis to librarians having a positive attitude toward the user than having a positive attitude toward task. Perhaps users expected that the librarian would have a positive attitude toward their job but were more concerned about the librarian’s attitude toward them.

In the critical incident analysis, attitude was the number one ranked theme for both users and librarians. This finding gave further weight to the importance of attitude. Relationship quality also rated high for users in their perceptions of success or failure. Similarly, in the paired perception analysis, users ranked attitude of librarian first with twelve (44%) out of twenty-seven interactions and relationship quality second with seven (26%). In contrast, librarians ranked attitude of users fourth, but rated first information, a content theme, (in twenty [74%] out of the twenty-seven interactions). A combination category of attitude and information ranked second with librarians.

Results from the critical incident and paired perception analyses suggest that attitude was most critical in users’ perceptions of success or failure. Librarians, however, were more concerned with the content dimension of information or combinations of information exchange and user’s attitude. It also may be that librarians made judgments primarily based on information transfer, but secondarily because of the relational factors.
Differences between Librarians and Users on Critical Relational Dimensions

Research question 4 asked: Do those aspects of relational dimensions of communication judged of critical importance by users differ from those of librarians, and if so, how?

It is clear that the evaluation criteria of librarians differed from those of users. Because librarians have traditionally learned to evaluate the success of the reference interaction based on the information exchange, it was not surprising that they tended to assess their interactions in terms of their ability to provide the correct information. The analysis of paired perceptions suggested that when information was unavailable or incomplete, librarians believed the interaction to be unsuccessful. Users, on the other hand, thought the interaction was successful if the librarian was pleasant and tried to help them, even if the information was not obtained. Often users do not possess the knowledge necessary to evaluate the librarian's technical performance, so they emphasize the interpersonal qualities.21

The Importance of Attitude

As noted above, in the critical incident analysis, the number one ranked factor for librarians and users is attitude. For librarians, six (43%) of fourteen incidents were categorized as attitude of user, five of these were negative, one positive. For users, nineteen (58%) out of thirty-three incidents were related to this theme, six negative and thirteen positive. In short for users and librarians the attitude of the other in the interaction was the most important relational aspect. Further, librarians were especially sensitive to negative user attitude toward themselves and toward the task.

Attitude was the only factor ranked similarly by librarians and users in the critical incident analysis. Following attitude, librarians ranked content dimensions information and knowledge base as second and third, and relationship quality, a relational theme, as fourth. Users, in contrast, ranked relationship quality second, making their two top-ranked categories relational, encompassing twenty-six out of thirty-three incidents. This finding makes a strong case for relational aspects being of overall greater importance to users than to librarians.

The relational theme of approachability emerged in two of the unsuccessful incidents for users, but not for librarians. Users were found to
be more sensitive to librarians’ nonverbal behavior than librarians were to users’ nonverbal cues.

As seen in the outline of categories, both users and librarians discussed many relational qualities, but the librarians placed greater emphasis on the user’s attitude toward task whereas users tended to emphasize the librarian’s attitude toward user. Regarding facilitators, for the librarians, it may be more important that the user be interested and enthusiastic (mentioned by more librarians than any other quality). Users placed importance upon the librarian being helpful and nice.

**Barriers**

In the area of barriers, the librarians’ category scheme dealing with content dimensions was more fully developed than that of users. Librarians emphasized lack of knowledge base as more critical to failure than did the users. Regarding relational barriers, the same subcategories emerged as did for facilitators:
- attitude;
- relationship quality;
- approachability (lack of).

For librarians, the number and diversity of subcategories under negative attitude toward librarian were more developed than negative attitude toward task, opposite the findings for facilitators, above. Most often, librarians reported that qualities in users such as impatient, fearful, and insecure were likely to lead to unsuccessful interactions. Thus, librarians perceived that a healthy user attitude toward task facilitated success, but a negative attitude toward librarian was more likely to lead to failure.

Both users and librarians reported that their negative perceptions were much more centered on relational factors. Under negative attitude of librarians, users’ subcategories include evades user, resists user, and resists interaction. These were not present in the librarin’s scheme. Perhaps this was because usually the user sought out the librarian for the interaction and so was more sensitive to perceptions that the librarian was trying to avoid contact. Evidence suggests that users perceived from the librarian’s nonverbal behavior that the librarian was resisting them or evading them. On the other hand, because users normally initiate the contact with librarians, librarians may not know which users are avoiding contact.
Several librarians described their frustration in laboring to help users, only to have their advice totally disregarded. These frustrations constitute the subcategory user rejecting librarian. One librarian commented:

The information that he was requesting was available in these particular sources, but he refused to even consider utilizing these particular sources (L02).

Another found this type of user behavior puzzling:

I don’t know why they sometimes ask for something and then, you know, they practically throw it away as soon as you give it to them (L05).

This librarian may have felt personally rejected when the user discarded the proffered information.

**Nonverbal Behaviors and Approachability**

Overall, users were much more sensitive to librarians’ nonverbal behaviors than librarians were to users’. Explicit references by librarians to users’ nonverbal behavior were very infrequent. Regarding nonverbal behavior by librarians, a few librarians did discuss librarians’ approachability. One librarian said good reference librarians needed to let the user know they were open and receptive. When probed about how this was communicated to the user, the librarian replied:

I think just when you’re looking at them and nodding and ‘cause I think I read something recently where it says people can be very intimidated if somebody’s just sitting there silently while the person is explaining just kind of looking at them . . . It gets you nervous, it’s like . . . they’re not listening, they’re just looking at me staring at me, they’re not moving, they’re not nodding . . . they don’t look receptive at all. (L03)

Another librarian, when asked to describe qualities of a good reference librarian, mentioned the importance of being able to read nonverbal cues in the reference interview:
Discussion of Findings

It's the ability to be able to read people, their gestures, their mannerisms, being able to assess psychological qualities that would allow a librarian to communicate better if indeed the librarian was not able to read these qualities. (L02)

Although librarians made few comments about nonverbal behavior, users were especially sensitive to the nonverbal behaviors of librarians. Users who may be approaching the reference librarian with some fear were more apt to be sensitive to the librarian's nonverbal cues. Perhaps they were looking for reassurance that their approach to the librarian was welcome. Four users mentioned negative affect when the librarian seemed distracted or inattentive. One user described this behavior:

Usually when they are not getting up from their desk or you can see that they are not happy to look for something for you really . . . It has happened a few times, usually they will just direct you to just go and look under such and such a journal . . . but they're not really making the effort. . . . Usually they will try to avoid some eye contact and just play like they're very busy and maybe they are. (U16)

Users were particularly aware of librarians’ face and eye expression. The example above mentioned avoidance of eye contact, and another user, describing a negative interaction, said: “She looked like she did not know what I was talking about . . . a blank state and also almost like irritated.” (U22) Users, sensitive to nonverbal behaviors, interpreted as negative actions those that librarians may think of as neutral behavior, such as having a cup of coffee at the reference desk or talking to another librarian.

The critical incident analysis also found two users but no librarians who reported that approachability affected the outcome of the interaction. This is further evidence that users were more sensitive to librarians' nonverbal behavior than librarians were to users' nonverbal cues. Findings of users' sensitivity to librarians' nonverbal behavior point out a need for librarians to become more conscious of the nonverbal behaviors they exhibit because these behaviors may be interpreted by users as barriers.22
Ancillary Findings: Time Pressure and Information Technologies

Time pressure was an external constraint perceived by librarians and users to be a barrier. In some cases, users need to leave the library in a short time, say, to be in class. Three students refused to be interviewed for this reason. Deadlines for assignments also create time pressure. These deadlines become more numerous as the semester draws to a close and users and librarians become increasingly stressed. Unlike many other professionals, librarians generally do not make appointments with library users. This ensures that at the busiest times of the semester, more users in need of urgent help actually get less of the librarian’s time. One librarian reported finishing with one user so she could return to the reference desk to help others:

I was trying to get back to the desk, but I remember thinking when I left her there, I don’t know if I noticed someone else was waiting or what, but I remember thinking when I left her at the *Negro Almanac* that I had to get back to the desk. (L05)

The librarian felt pressured to return to the reference desk, not sure that the user found the needed information in the almanac. One implication of these findings for practice is that at busy times more than one librarian should be on duty or available to relieve some of these time pressures. Librarians on duty alone could also ask users to return to the desk if additional help is needed. Finally, when busy times ease up, the librarian should check on users still at work.

Another impact of time constraints on reference interaction is the student’s willingness to devote sufficient time to research. Students tend to procrastinate, waiting until deadlines loom, and want to do library work quickly. One librarian remembered a conversation with a user:

“Oh there was an *excellent* article I just came upon, did you take that information?” . . . and she said, “Oh, no,” she really “didn’t have the time,” so that was also frustrating if she did not really have the time to do it at that moment. (L08)

Users also seemed to be very conscious of the librarian’s stinginess with their time. Three users described negative critical incidents in which
they perceived the librarian as not being willing or able to spend enough
time. One user commented:

A few years back, I went in there looking for self-help books and
the librarian was so busy, caught up in what she was doing, you
know, she didn’t have time to help everybody else. . . . She should
have at least took the time out. She could get back to whatever
she was doing, you know, at a later time. (U03)

Note that this encounter made a lasting impression on the user who
remembered this busy librarian from “a few years back.” Another user
remarked that:

It’s like they have other things to do, don’t have time for us. Yeah,
you’re taking out a book, they’re sitting there and you’re waiting
for them, and they’re like “Well wait a minute” and you’re “Well,
wait a minute, I have a class to go to, you’re over here getting
paid, you know, do something.” (U15)

The time factor can also be a beneficial element. In one positive criti-
cal incident, the user was in a “time crunch” and was grateful that the
librarian stayed a few minutes late to help with an interlibrary loan:

I came in right at five o’clock when the interlibrary loan
woman usually leaves, but she stayed a few extra minutes to
help me get the forms so I could go and get the books. And I
was in a time crunch, so I did need to get them right away.
(U21)

Information Technology
There was little agreement among librarians about whether the new tech-
nologies were time-savers or time-wasters. One librarian discussed how
electronic databases were faster than print:

Probably, you know, if the computers are open, I always would
try that as a first step because it takes more of my time to look in
the print sources. If it’s really busy, I’ll say, “Sit down at that
computer and . . . try to play around with it and as soon as I get a chance, I'll come and help you with it.” (L03)

One user also stated that information retrieval systems were time-savers: “Obviously the computer as a tool is just a big time-saver.” (U08)

But some librarians believe that computerized information systems increased the time spent with each user. One librarian remarked that:

The products were developed ultimately with hope that they would perhaps speed up or shorten the library user–librarian interaction, but it seems to have had, at least in this point in time, the opposite [effect] . . . per library user interview might have perhaps doubled in general. (L02)

This librarian also felt that the number of users needing help has risen but that “there are fewer members of the library staff” due to recent budget cuts. For this librarian, the “challenge is how to perhaps even just measure up to precomputer days.” (L02)

Another librarian believed that, for the user, it was not an issue of using less time but, instead, getting more for the same amount of time used:

It’s more an issue of how much you’re getting for your time, you know. The efficiency is really . . . what’s happening is because of . . . this access to more information, the patron who is genuinely interested gets really excited and starts digging in much more than he or she might have if it was paper sources. . . . The patron may only have an hour . . . a lot of these students here, they work full-time and are doing the master’s part-time . . . Unfortunately, this is the reality. . . . so what is happening is that you’re still spending the hour, but you’re getting a lot more out of it because the technology is giving it to you faster. (L04)

Once again, this referred to the high premium on time—here, the user's. Also of interest is the librarian's reference to “efficiency.”

In addition to the disagreement on whether electronic resources save or cost time, there was also little agreement on the impact of information
technologies on the nature of the reference interaction. Two librarians felt that the basic nature was unchanged. One commented:

There's still a lot of work that is done by the librarian without the use of the technology so that there is still that interaction because, basically, you still have to find out what it is they want before you give them the technology. (L08)

In contrast, another librarian asserted that these technologies: “changed the entire interaction . . . from a skill perspective the interaction is more intensive . . . .” (L02) Several librarians felt that computerized information systems increased the librarian’s involvement. One said:

It’s a lot more labor-intensive. . . . You’re there a lot more, and they’re calling on you a lot more. . . . They sort of think the librarian is the only source once they sit down in front of the computer. . . . They don’t bother to read all the instructions . . . . they just kind of turn around and want us to answer all their questions. . . . I think that makes the job a lot different . . . you’re probably interacting more. (L05)

Another reflected on the effect of technologies on the user:

I think it has brought some excitement and ease into the whole process. My favorite story was a lady, you know she hadn’t been back to school for a while, she’s probably in her mid-40s or whatever, and she’s sitting over at the CD-ROM station giggling, and I walked over to her and I said, “You know, I really had to come over and find out {laugh} . . . I never heard anybody get quite this carried away.” And she said, “This is so wonderful, I can’t believe it. It’s so much easier than it was before.” And that comes in, you know, with the kids . . . creates a whole ‘nother level in terms of, I think it’s becoming more and more our role to help them learn to evaluate the information. (L07)

The librarian was referring to the fact that computerized databases provide such enormous amounts of information that the user has trouble
deciding what is relevant. The idea that the librarian’s role may be changing from information provider to include information evaluator is germane and challenges traditional conceptualizations in which librarians give out information but leave evaluation to the user.

Although librarians reported some users found computerized technology easy to use, one librarian perceived technology to be a barrier:

Some patrons have computer phobia . . . have been threatened by it, feeling intimidated by it . . . so that does make a difference, but it’s a minor factor because it’s fairly easy to set them at ease. And if you feel that this is what’s happening, you just spend a little more time with them at the computer. (L04)

This librarian was sensitive to users who feel threatened by technology. The librarian realized that attention to users’ relational needs, by spending additional time to “set them at ease,” was important to the success of the information retrieval. Susan Anthes has also discussed the need for “high touch,” increased interpersonal involvement, between user and librarian as systems become increasingly complex.25

In summary, time constraints and information retrieval technologies had a great impact on the librarian–user interaction. The outline of categories lists the range of responses regarding these variables.26 User and librarian informants both reported that these two factors are vitally important in understanding the present dynamics of the reference interaction.

Notes


7. Ibid., 373.

8. This was noted in chapter 2. See also Mark J. Thompson, Nathan M. Smith, and Bonnie L. Woods, “A Proposed Model of Self-Disclosure,” *RQ* 20 (winter 1980): 160–64.


13. Ibid., 8.


17. See also Street, “Interaction Processes and Outcomes in Interviews,” who noted that the purpose of all types of interviews was to exchange information.


22. See also Marie L. Radford, “A Qualitative Investigation of Nonverbal Immediacy in the User’s Decision to Approach the Academic Reference Librarian,”


26. See appendix G.