Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

User-Focused Values of Empathy, Empowerment, and Communication Are Unheralded in Previous Conceptualizations of Reference and Information Services

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A Review of:

VanScoy, Amy. (2021). Using Q methodology to understand conflicting conceptualizations of reference and information service. *Library and Information Science Research, 43*(1), 101107. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2021.101107

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Abstract

Objective – To understand how experienced librarians conceptualize reference and information service (RIS), and to determine if and to what extent these conceptualizations match existing RIS models.

Design – Q methodology card sort followed by short interview.

Setting – Academic, public, school, and special libraries in Slovenia, South Africa, and the United States.

Subjects – Sixty-six (66) librarians from Slovenia, South Africa, and the United States.

Methods – The researcher asked participants to sort 35 statements about RIS from "Least like how I think" to "Most like how I think." The participants had the opportunity to comment on their card sort.

From these card sorts, the researcher used statistical methods to generate factors describing underlying conceptualizations of RIS. These factors were compared to existing literature on RIS.

Main Results – Departing from the prevailing "information provision/instruction" conceptualizations of RIS, the researcher found that most respondents conceptualized RIS according to three previously unacknowledged paradigms: 1) transformation and empathy; 2) communication and information provision; and 3) empowering and learning. Fifty-three (53) of the 66 participants loaded on to one of these three factors, i.e. sorted their cards in a similar way to other participants in that factor. Factors 2 and 3 supported existing ideas of RIS in the literature, whereas factor 1 presented a novel understanding of RIS. Common to all three factors, however, is a strong focus on the user.

Conclusion – Traditional models conceptualize RIS as emphasizing either information provision *or* instruction. The practical judgments of experienced, working librarians, however, gesture toward different, more nuanced theoretical conclusions. Beyond the traditional poles of RIS, librarians consider empathy, empowerment, transformation, and communication as other important aspects of the RIS function.

Commentary

Reference interviews are notoriously nebulous. A hypothetical patron may approach the reference desk with only a half-formed query and the knowledge that they need assistance. What is the RIS librarian to make of this situation? Existing conceptions of RIS typically describe a dichotomy of competing approaches, contrasting the timely but transactional paradigm of information provision with the "teach-a-man-to-fish" paradigm of instruction. Before we ask which conceptualization provides a better model of RIS, however, we should question whether either accurately describes the work of RIS librarians in the first place. This study's author has steadily been working toward a theoretical resolution in this area, with relevant publications in 2010, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2017, and now, 2021. This well-designed study seeks to address the gap between theory and practice by asking professional librarians how they characterize their own work at the reference desk.

Under the rubric of Glynn's critical appraisal tool (2006), this study meets an established standard of validity. The researcher sampled widely, data collection was fair and objective, and the study would be reproducible from the researcher's notes. Q methodology is a well-established system for exploring subjective opinions, and is an appropriate choice for the stated research question, "How do experienced librarians conceptualize RIS?" By employing a widely-recognized methodology, the study's author could refer to numerous previous studies to satisfactorily justify her decisions. For example, the author references a systematic review of Q methodology studies (Kampen & Tamas, 2014) to explain methodological considerations about the number of participants.

This circumspect, reflective concern is a hallmark of the study. The author makes tentative supportive links between this study's findings and the literature, but is careful not to state anything too strongly where it is not warranted. For instance, while the findings suggest that conceptualizations of RIS vary across types of libraries, the researcher cautions that these results should be considered exploratory. The author also acknowledges certain methodological limitations encountered. For example, when participants interpreted certain phrases in the card sort negatively—such as statements perceived to be too self-centered beginning with "I feel…" or "I am…"— and were therefore reluctant to rank them highly. However, since the three factors revealed patterns of opinion across users, a shared lower ranking of perceived-negative phrases could be significant in itself and in fact confirm the characteristics of each factor.

For scholars of RIS, this study helpfully crosses an important threshold from the descriptive to the prescriptive. Illustrating what RIS *is* by asking how practicing reference librarians themselves

conceptualize their work, this study motions toward what RIS *should be*. For instance, how should we teach RIS in library schools? Toward what ideal of practice should RIS librarians aim? Already this study suggests that what is most important in RIS is not a choice between A and B, but an understanding that a diverse set of users has a diverse set of needs to be met with more than a single-minded approach to service.

References

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