Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

An Awareness of Library Patrons' Social Styles May Play a Role in Librarians' Satisfaction with the Reference Interview

A Review of:
Sisselman, P. (2009). Exploiting the social style of patrons to improve their satisfaction with the reference interview. *Library Review*, *58*, 123-133.

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Abstract

Objective – To determine if a patron's social style affects how satisfied the patron and the librarian working with him/her are with the reference interview, and if a librarian's knowledge of social styles leads to greater satisfaction with the reference interview for all involved.

Design – Direct observation, two survey instruments, and a checklist used to identify patrons' social styles.

Setting – A public library system in the Northeastern US.

Subjects – A total of 24 library patrons who sought assistance at the reference desk of a public library and the five librarians who delivered reference services to them.

Methods – The researcher observed 24 reference interviews conducted by five different librarians at a reference desk in a public library system. It is unclear if all 24 interviews took place in the same library. Reference interviews that took place during the times the researcher was on site and did not relate to the use of the public computer terminals were included in the study.

During each interaction, the researcher compared the patron's behaviour to a checklist of traits relating to assertiveness and responsiveness. For example, more assertive behaviours included moving and talking quickly and sustained eye contact. Less assertive behaviours included "waiting to be

asked" and soft speech (p. 127). More responsive behaviours usually consist of a greater willingness to engage on an emotional level with the librarian and more open facial expressions and gestures.

The balance of behaviours across the two categories was used by the researcher to determine which of the following social style categories a patron belonged to: driver, analytical, amiable, or expressive. Drivers, described in social style theory as "practical and task orientated," were those who demonstrated "less responsive" and "more assertive" behaviours at the desk (pp. 127-128). Those who were "less responsive" and "less assertive" were labelled analytical (p. 128). According to social style theory, analyticals "collect quite a bit of data before making decisions" and are methodical (p. 127). Patrons who were "more responsive" and "less assertive" were determined to be amiable; and expressives were those who were "more responsive" and "more assertive" (p. 128). Amiables are described as "easy-going" and expressives as "outgoing" and "spontaneous" (p. 127).

After the researcher had observed twelve reference interviews, the participating librarians received information on how to recognize and adapt to individual social styles. The information they received took the form of an article, a diagram of the four social style categories, and examples of famous people and their social styles. After the librarians received this information, the researcher then observed twelve additional reference interviews.

After each reference interview, the patron and librarian completed separate surveys. The surveys were adapted from the tools used by the Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Program. Each survey consisted of ten questions, which gauged the patron's and the librarian's level of satisfaction with the reference experience. Librarians responded to questions relating to whether they were able to answer the patron's question, their perceptions of the patron's satisfaction, how comfortable and confident they felt during the interaction, and whether they "taught the patron something new" (p. 132). The patron survey asked about the quality of service patrons feel they received from the librarian, whether or not they found what they were looking for, and if they learned something new from the experience. A score was calculated based on the following possible responses: yes (4 points), partly (2 points) and no (0 points).

Main Results – Of the 24 patrons observed in the study, the majority (10) were analyticals. The next largest group was expressives (6), followed by amiables (4), and drivers (3). The remaining patron was classified as both a driver and an expressive because he/she held an equal number of characteristics for both categories.

The median survey scores indicated that, overall, librarians rated the quality of reference interview lower than their patrons. The median score for the librarian survey after the first twelve interviews was 28, while the median score for their patrons was 36. The correlation between these scores was r=0.27. After the librarians received information on social styles, the median score of the librarian survey rose to 32. However, the patrons' median score dropped slightly to 35. The correlation of the scores after the intervention was r=0.57.

The responses of librarians and patrons most closely corresponded when the patrons were amiables. Amiables and the librarians who worked with them were in all in agreement on whether the patron's question was answered. Only one of the expressives and one of the drivers disagreed with the librarians' response to this question. In both cases, the librarians' responses were "partly" while the patrons answered "yes" (p. 129). Twenty percent of the analyticals were satisfied with the information they received from the librarian. In some cases, they were satisfied even though the information they were provided was not what they were looking for when they first approached the reference desk.

The study suggests that there may be a disconnect between librarian and patron responses in regard to whether the librarian taught the patron something new in the exchange. According to Sisselman, all expressives and 75% of amiables responded that they had learned something new, but only 93% of the librarians who worked with the expressives and 50% of those working with amiables felt that they had done so. The scores for drivers for this question were double those of the librarians they worked with – the actual figures were not provided by the author. The results for analyticals on this question were not reported.

Conclusion – The findings of the study suggest that a patron's social style may play a role in how they perceive the reference interview. The author also suggests that "there may be a correlation between librarians' understanding of the social styles of patrons (analytical, expressive, driver, or amiable) and the outcomes of reference interviews" (p. 130). Possible areas of application for these findings include improved public service and tailoring of communication and marketing strategies to the diverse social styles of current and potential patrons.

Commentary

Sisselman's exploration of social styles offers another angle at which to examine the reference interview. However, the conclusions drawn by the author about the influence of social styles are undermined by the fact that there was inadequate representation of some social style groups amongst the research participants. More than twice as many analyticals participated than amiables or expressives. Sisselman acknowledges this imbalance, suggesting that because of their personality traits, analyticals may be more likely than other groups to approach the reference desk. This assumption has not been tested, and the author identifies this as an area for future research.

What is also not clear is if the pre- and post-intervention sample of patrons was similar in terms of the mix of social styles represented. Did the librarians' scores rise because they better understood the verbal and non-verbal cues the patron was sending after being provided with additional information, or did the more expressive patrons largely fall into the post-intervention sample? Providing the breakdown of the social styles of both the pre- and post-intervention samples would have provided some clarity on this issue.

This was not the only place where more information about the study framework would have been desirable. The researcher isolated the social styles of patrons from other variables that may or may not have had an impact on how they perceived the reference interview, such as the gender and age of the patrons. Reference interviews that took place when the researcher was present were included in the study, but we are not told if all the interviews took place in the same library, in the same general timeslot, or on the same day of the week – all of which could have influenced who was present in the library to ask reference questions or the type of questions the librarian was tasked with answering. We do not know if the participants were equally divided among the five librarians. The possible impact of observer bias is also unaddressed. The lack of information about other factors which may have influenced the reference interview or who was available to participate makes it difficult to know how much weight to place on the variable of social styles in impacting the results.

The results of the study should also not be overstated. The training the librarians received only increased the median survey scores for the librarians – the median score amongst patrons actually decreased after the intervention. No information was provided as to how the intervention changed the librarians' behaviour, and there was no evidence presented by the author that the patron's satisfaction with the reference interview was influenced by librarians having this knowledge. Only the librarians' perceptions of the encounter appear to have

shifted. In fact, Sisselman states that patron responses to survey questions relating to the broader reference experience (for example, if the librarian was "courteous and considerate") had no "significant impact" on the overall survey results (p. 128; p. 133). In addition, the author's inclusion of percentages without clearly indicating the number of responses, particularly when those numbers are very small, lends more weight to conclusions than is warranted. Social styles offer some intriguing possibilities for libraries and librarians, particularly in aiding library staff in better understanding the behavioural cues of their patrons, but further studies are required to determine the extent to which they play a role in a patron's satisfaction with library services.