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If I Ask, Will They Answer?

Evaluating Public Library Reference Service to Gay and Lesbian Youth

For gay and lesbian youth, the public library can be a key resource for information about emerging and often-confusing sexual feelings. A good reference librarian can mean the difference between the youth fleeing the library or considering the library a helpful refuge. This article reports the results of an unobtrusive observation study in British Columbia in which a youth asked a gay and lesbian-related question at twenty different public library reference desks. The behaviors and verbal responses of the reference librarians were recorded afterward by the youth on an observation checklist based on the RUSA Guidelines for Reference Behavior. Most of the librarians scored acceptably in areas such as maintaining confidentiality but the study showed that improvement is needed in other areas such as conducting a good reference interview and awareness of relevant gay or lesbian book or Web resources.

In their groundbreaking 1990 book *Gay and Lesbian Library Service,* Gough and Greenblatt regret that they were unable to include a chapter on a very relevant, but as yet unexamined topic: "accounts by library users of their experiences while looking for gay- or lesbian-related information in libraries."[1] It is the purpose of this research project to address this deficiency, which continues to exist fifteen years later. Specifically, the research investigates the level of reference service provided by public librarians for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT), or questioning youth in the greater Vancouver area. In recognition of the diversity within this community, the term GLBT will be used throughout the paper, except where quoted authors have chosen a different designation.

Libraries are very important places for GLBT youth, as evident from the definition in *Cassell's Queer Companion*:

> LIBRARY: One of the main sites of self-discovery for lesbians and gay men, usually through the books but sometimes (mainly for gay men) through the washrooms. Many of us, particularly in the dark days before the Stonewall riot, remember going in to libraries to check for references that would give some validity to the vague stirrings inside us we knew marked us out as different. Starting with dictionaries, where we could check the words we were beginning to learn, we could go on to other works to find images or descriptions of others like us. Often such a search has been depressing, and sometimes the only books which

even touch upon same-sex eroticism are those which exist to warn us off it, but the mere act of looking serves as a catalyst for the formation of identity.[2]

Carmichael supports this view in his book on "lesbigay" library history, where he writes that the common professional library saying that "libraries change lives" is often literally true for gays and lesbians as, through reading the evidence, they find that they are not alone.[3] He notes that this was the case for actor Stephen Fry, for whom "slim volume after slim volume catalog[ed] the pansy path to freedom."[4]

The theme of young adults searching for information about their awakening yet puzzling sexual identity appears repeatedly in gay and lesbian autobiographies.

Often, the school library, a potentially threatening environment, fails to provide any clues, so the public library becomes the next stop. According to Greenblatt, the "coming-out literature abounds with descriptions of individuals surreptitiously, yet expectantly, surveying [public] library shelves, searching for answers to their many questions about homosexuality."[5]

How much help do GLBT youth receive from librarians in their search? Professional association codes clearly mandate that librarians practice "equality" when they manage collections and provide reference service, so one would expect high quality service. The American Library Association's (ALA) 1993 policy on access advocates free access to library collections and services regardless of gender or sexual orientation; the Reference and User Services Association's (RUSA) Guidelines for good reference service state that a successful librarian "maintains objectivity and does not interject value judgments about subject matter or the nature of the question into the transaction."[6] The Canadian Library Association statement on intellectual freedom says that "it is the responsibility of libraries to guarantee and facilitate access to all expressions of knowledge and intellectual activity, including those which some elements of society may consider to be unconventional, unpopular or unacceptable."[7] The more specific statement on young adult services in public libraries says that these services must acknowledge the developmental needs of young adults, two of these needs being "mastery of a rapidly changing body," and "the acceptance of a self-chosen, appropriate sex role."[8]

This professional emphasis on equality of service and GLBT rights is relatively recent, and practice of this philosophy is not universally accepted by members of the public, as evident from censorship challenges to gay and lesbian materials, nor is it universally accepted by professional librarians, according to some research studies.[9] The newness of GLBT services can be gauged by the chronology of their appearance in library catalogs. Homosexuality was totally absent from the Library of Congress subject headings until 1946, when the heading "homosexuality" was approved, followed by "lesbianism" in 1954. The "see also sexual perversion" reference accompanied both headings until 1972. In 1976, the Library of Congress included "lesbians" and "homosexuals, male" under the rubric of "classes of persons," but did not include "gay" as a subject heading until 1987.[10] These changes through the 1970s and 1980s were largely the result of lobbying done by ALA's Gay and Lesbian Task Force, with Sandy Berman playing a leading role, and since 1990, many new GLBT-related subject headings have been added.

Although library catalogs have been slow to change in response to librarians' needs to access relevant GLBT materials, it must be noted that sixty years have passed since "homosexuality" became available as a subject heading to reference librarians, so professional acumen in this area should not be a problem. Personal attitudes and beliefs may be a stumbling block to providing good service, however, as these spring from individual upbringing, and many librarians may have been raised in homes in which homophobic attitudes were the norm. Despite experiences in adulthood such as having a close personal or professional relationship with a gay and lesbian friend or library colleague, such attitudes often remain unexamined and unchanged, according to Gough and Greenblatt, and the research of Carmichael and Shontz.[11] They are rooted so deeply that they survive even the lectures on professional ethics that most librarians experience while obtaining their degrees. As a result, a librarian may retain an antagonism or quiet indifference that is revealed in inadequate collection management of gay and lesbian materials, a transgression that is impersonal and often hidden. But does this antagonism or indifference manifest itself in a more direct way: in the reference interview? This unobtrusive investigation of behavior to see whether librarians are indeed abiding by the tenets of current accepted codes of tolerance and skillfully using the subject headings now available to them will hopefully inform us and prove to be instructive about service to this customer group that so desperately needs our help.

Literature Review

Coming Out

Three research studies have confirmed the opinions of Carmichael and Greenblatt regarding library use by questioning GLBT youth: the library was either the first or second-most important source for information when people were struggling through their coming-out period, and it continued to play an important role in their lives.[12] A recent study concluded, however, that the Internet, accessed at home, is now the most vital source of information for college-age GLBT youth as they worked through coming out to friends and parents. However, this same report noted that questioning youth still living at home may be reluctant to access such information on home computers, and therefore the public library could and should provide the anonymity and safety necessary for such Internet searches.[13]

Collections and Characters

Research or discussion about reference service to the adult and youth GLBT community is almost nonexistent: only one brief but well-written article could be found.[14] Most articles and research reports on library service to GLBT youth focus on one or more of three areas: the need for more extensive and up-to-date GLBT-focused material in youth collections, the treatment of GLBT-related subjects (such as AIDS or coming out) in this material, or the depiction of gay or lesbian characters within GLBT-oriented fiction materials.

Clyde and Lobdan conclude that youth fiction related to homosexuality remains difficult to identify in review sources and that the images presented of gay and lesbian characters in the fiction that can be located are generally conservative.[15] Rothbauer and McKechnie's study, an excellent analysis of gay and lesbian fiction in reviewing media, discovered that most reviews of GLBT young adult materials are favorable. However, they also detected a tension "between the desire to provide access to gay and lesbian fiction . . . and the difficulties potentially associated with providing material that might be regarded as sensitive or inappropriate by others."[16] Perhaps the most authoritative and comprehensive study of young adult GLBT literature is Jenkins' 1998 research. In her conclusion, she comments on the cautionary aspects of many novels, the lack of portrayals of lesbians, few people of color, and the absence of GLBT community settings.[17]

GLBT Youth—At Risk and Afraid

Research on GLBT youth that reveals the gravity of their "at risk" status and the fear that pervades their search for information is also relevant to this study. Youth in general are often consumed with feelings of isolation, but for gay and lesbian youth, these feelings may be exacerbated by teasing and harassment that escalates to physical abuse. According to a study by the organization Advocates for Youth, one-third of gay and lesbian youth say they have attempted suicide at least once, about 30 percent have dropped out of school, and as many as 40 percent of homeless youth are gay.[18]

GLBT youth are often afraid of taking any action that might mark them as gay and lesbian, and expose them to a homophobic reaction. These fears may be exacerbated by antagonistic or uncaring adults in authority they have encountered at school. A survey of teachers indicated they are often unaware of the issues surrounding GLBT youth, and that some would feel uncomfortable if they had to work with an openly gay or lesbian fellow teacher.[19] In two other studies, information gathered from GLBT students in surveys and interviews revealed that faced with indifferent or hostile responses from adults in authority, the students drew on amazing reservoirs of resiliency and perseverance to push warily ahead.[20] These school experiences lead youth to assume that similar treatment may be forthcoming from adults at other institutions, such as the public library. As a result, they may be reluctant to approach a stranger at a reference desk for fear of being singled out. McDowell emphasizes the need for confidentiality in the design and delivery of college instruction programs that include GLBT youth: the same need is evident for public library reference interactions so that youth can be confident that they will not be outed at the reference desk.[21]

Hughes-Hassell and Hinckley contend that GLBT youth, confronted with peers and even adults who use "dyke," "fag," and " "that's so gay" as common insults, suffer even greater isolation as they "struggle with the decision of not just who they are, but whether they are, and who they dare tell about it."[22] They fear that "candor will only bring rejection" and therefore are hesitant to ask adults for information about GLBT organizations that may be their lifeline through this isolation. According to the authors, the Internet has provided youth with the chance to interact within "a virtual community—a community not limited by the chance circumstance of geography or the prejudices of homophobia," and that librarians should place a high priority on providing GLBT youth with access to these Internet resources. Huffine also emphasizes the safety of anonymity that the Internet provides gay youth, and that "the user-friendliness of this digital information often surpasses the approachability and retrieval speed of reference staff."[23] But he fears that without any human mediation, GLBT youth will not get the best information available as they struggle with an avalanche of sexual information without context or reliability and outside the appropriate level for their age group.

Method

Unobtrusive Observation–When Is It Appropriate?

This research project was carried out during 2001–03, with much of the first year devoted to obtaining University of British Columbia (UBC) Ethics Board approval of the method. Unobtrusive observation without informed consent was the method chosen to carry out the study, in which an unannounced customer proxy asks a reference question and records her observations regarding librarian response. Bryman recommends this method for situations when other methods such as surveys and interviews are very likely to produce inadequate results because the respondents' answers may be influenced by their desire to "look good" when faced with a difficult question.[24] Palys also endorses this method when the researchers are "convinced that the prospective gains to knowledge are greater than the costs to respondents, that there's no other way to do the research, and that one has been particularly conscientious in protecting the research participants' dignity and welfare."[25] The researchers were indeed convinced that these conditions had been met: we believed that if librarians were asked to answer a mailed survey or personal interview question such as "How would you respond to a gay and lesbian-related reference asked by a youth?," an unrealistic picture of reality would be produced. Only unobtrusive observation, a method that already has a solid history within LIS research for gathering information about reference service, could generate the desired data on this important topic.[26]

Ethical Review

All research conducted by UBC professors and students must be approved by the university's Behaviourial Research Ethics Board. As might be expected, the board scrutinizes very closely research projects that plan to employ unobtrusive methods. The application form includes a special section for such research, in which three questions must be answered in detail:

1. Deception undermines informed consent. Indicate why you believe deception is necessary to achieve your research objectives, and why you believe the benefits of the research outweigh the cost to the subjects.
2. Explain why you believe there will be no permanent damage as a result of the deception.
3. Describe how you will debrief subjects at the end of the study.

Our answers to the first two questions satisfied the board. We explained the method's desirable characteristics and how the importance of gathering information about service to this group at high risk for suicide and injury outweighed the cost to the reference librarians: their possible discomfiture when confronted with a challenging reference inquiry. Question 3 proved to be a stumbling block. The board followed the advice of research experts such as Neuman, who maintains that the "harm" of deception—most notably the anger of subjects at being deceived, must be diminished by personally debriefing the subjects after the deceptive encounter and explaining to them the purpose and importance of the research.[27] Conversely, we argued that singling out the library staff member with whom the proxy had the reference interview would cause that person embarrassment and could possibly lead to disapproval from fellow reference staff members and reprisals from the chief librarian. Drawing on the advice of Palys and Russell, we maintained that the subjects' dignity and welfare were best protected and they would be least harmed if their privacy and anonymity were strictly maintained, and that the "debriefing" could be achieved by the chief librarians distributing the research results, in which no personal or library names were mentioned, to their staff members.[28] Throughout the research process, we maintained a double-blind process so that individual libraries could not be linked to the data. The proxy labeled the recording sheets by number, and a research assistant perused the sheets to make certain that no identifying characteristics had been recorded before she forwarded the data to the chief investigator.

The ethics board also requested more justification and detail regarding the training of the proxy for her deceptive interaction, and the manner in which the proxy would record evidence of the interaction, and they stressed the need to see written evidence of each library's approval that such research could take place in the library. Documents explaining the research were sent to the chief librarians of eleven separate library systems in the greater Vancouver area, accompanied by an invitation to call the chief investigator regarding questions. The document explained that one of the reference desks in their main library or branch library might be visited, and requested that, if possible, staff not be informed of the study. However, the chief librarians could inform their staffs if they felt they needed to. The chief librarians asked many questions about the study: most wanted assurance that the proxy's behavior and her question would be within the range of their staff's normal experience and that the "staged" reference interaction would not require unusual time or effort. After receiving reassurances in these areas, all eleven directors gave their approval, and all felt comfortable not informing their front-line reference staff.

Satisfying the concerns of the ethics board required eight months: researchers planning to use this controversial method should take note, as this time required is not unusual. As soon as we received the hard-negotiated stamp of board approval and the signatures of all library directors, the proxy began visiting library service outlets in each of the eleven different cities within the greater Vancouver area. These systems have a total of seventy outlets (main libraries and branches) and serve a population of 2.4 million. Each system was visited at least once, and very large systems received more than one visit, for a total of twenty reference interactions. The proxy was a nineteen-year-old, female UBC university student who appeared to be about sixteen years of age—a high-school student. The age of the proxy was important for two reasons: the ethics board would not approve the use of a minor to gather data in a deceptive scenario, and we felt that the maturity of an older student would enhance observation and recording ability. The proxy was recruited through an advertisement for research volunteers posted at the UBC GLBT Association. She was not a public library user, and although she had experienced unsatisfactory service regarding gay and lesbian matters at other public service agencies, she had no previous public library experiences, positive or negative.

Data-gathering Process

The proxy, who will be given the pseudonym "Angela" for the remainder of this article, was instructed to approach a library staff member at the desk that served young adults. In most libraries, this was the general adult reference desk, but in several libraries, it appeared to be the combined children's/YA desk. At the time of the visits, all except one of the eleven library systems employed only professional librarians at their reference desks: one system employed library assistants at the desk on an occasional basis. It is likely, therefore, that all interactions were with professionals, but this cannot be verified due to privacy and anonymity concerns. Credentials,

however, were considered irrelevant to the focus of the study, as professional or paraprofessional status would be unknown to any questioning teenager, and unrelated to their assessment of service quality.

After she located the appropriate desk and an available reference staff member, Angela then asked the same question at each library:

"I am planning to start a club at my high school. A gay-straight alliance. What books do you have that could help me out?"

If a reference interview ensued, Angela was instructed to say that perhaps she would like a good novel for the group to read and discuss "like a book club." If she was given an outdated novel such as Nancy Garden's well-known 1982 novel *Annie on my Mind*, Angela was instructed to say that she wanted something more recent. If the librarian asked a follow-up question, such as "Is there anything else that you need?" Angela was to say that she would like information about other gay-straight alliances, and information about issues that she might face from school administrators and the community.

Immediately after the interaction, Angela completed an observation record, noting the librarian's actions and the resources recommended. Questions in the record were based on the ALA RUSA's "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals" and on the advice of Whitlatch in *Evaluating Reference Services* (2000).[29]

We acknowledge the difficulty of drawing a direct correlation between the GLBT-related question and librarian's behavior: a librarian who reacts inappropriately to a GLBT question may react the same way to a general "everyday" question; a librarian who is unable to locate any resources to answer a GLBT question may be just as unhelpful with other questions. To establish a more direct relationship between a GLBT question and librarian behavior would have required that Angela ask a "general" question of the same librarian at a different time, and compare the behaviors during the two interactions. However, the researchers felt that this double deception would stretch the limits permissible within unobtrusive observation methodology and rejected it. It was felt that a single set of reference interactions provided sufficient data to answer the research question. As Angela remarked, "It doesn't matter to a GLBT youth whether the librarian is nasty to everyone, not just her. What is important is how a confused and vulnerable young lesbian feels about the library."

Why a Question about Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs?

Stories about gay-straight alliance (GSA) clubs in high schools had appeared in newspapers and news magazines both in Canada and the United States during the three years prior to the study, so we knew that various resources existed in print, pamphlet form, and on the Web to support such a question. Examples of two such resources are "Fighting the

Silence: How to Support Your Gay and Straight Students" by Bott in *Voice of Youth Advocates*, the story of how a club was formed in a Cleveland high school, and the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) Web site.[30]

The problem of bullying in schools of students perceived by their peers to be gay was highlighted in Vancouver specifically by a widely publicized suicide case in 2000. Teenager Hamed Nastoh stated in his suicide letter that he was continually harassed because his schoolmates believed him to be gay.[31] Soon after this tragic death, the British Columbia Teacher's Federation endorsed the creation of gay-straight alliance clubs (GSAs) in provincial high schools, and many school boards followed with support:

> GSAs are clubs that aim to create safe, welcoming and accepting school environments for all youth and are student-led and teacher supported. . . . In keeping with our policies and our Mission statement, schools must be safe environments where all students and staffs can learn and socialize. The [Vancouver] Board of Trustees supports the initiatives students and teachers take to establish Gay/Straight Alliances in Vancouver Schools.[32]

Results

Who Was at the Desk?

Angela visited all twenty libraries in the late afternoon or evening of a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday. She was the only customer at the reference desk at thirteen libraries; one or two customers were waiting at six libraries; and there was a "crowd" of three customers at one library. At the time Angela approached the desks, eleven desks appeared to be staffed with only one person; eight desks had two persons; and one desk had three people ready to assist. As noted previously, it is unknown whether these staff members were professional librarians: Angela could not determine this without asking directly, which would have been extremely inappropriate, considering the goal of normal, unobtrusive behavior. However, most Lower Mainland public library reference desks are indeed staffed with librarians with master's degrees, so those who interacted with Angela will be referred to as "librarians."

Data on number of customers and staff members at the desk were gathered to see whether either of these variables had an impact on the reference interaction or Angela's satisfaction with service, but cross-tabulation of these variables revealed no relationship between these numbers and quality of service.

Approachability

Angela recorded the initial verbal response of the librarian, and described the librarian's body language and facial

expressions as she asked her question. She followed this with her overall first impressions of the librarian's initial attitude toward her, based on those words and physical clues. This information was important, as the reference literature notes that customers' first impressions are crucial, particularly when they may be uncertain or reluctant.

First Words

The best librarians started right in on a reference interview, asking Angela gentle but probing questions such as:

"Okay, are you looking for reference materials or novels at the moment?" or "Oh, I heard that the first one [gay-straight alliance club] was started this year. That's great. Let's start with the catalog to find what you might need."

The worst response was silence. No words—just a blank stare. As the silence continued, Angela noted, "I was tempted to run away!" Only when she repeated the question did the librarian haltingly begin to help. Another librarian responded with, "Hmmm, I'm not really sure. I don't know where to look. Have you looked it up on the computer?"—first words that certainly would not inspire confidence in a hesitant teenager.

In a classic case of garbled communication, one librarian replied with "Oh—a Lion's Club—you want information on Lion's Clubs." Even after Angela corrected her, this confused librarian needed help: "An "alliance club? What's a gay-straight alliance club?"

Body Language

Angela gave one-third of the librarians top marks for being "smiling, expressive, and open" or "casual and relaxed," while another third received passing but mediocre assessments for being "controlled and professional" or "somewhat frigidy" (sic.) Among those librarians whom Angela criticized for body language were two whose dramatically raised eyebrows revealed their true emotions, in Angela's opinion. One librarian raised just one eyebrow, projecting a look that appeared to say, "Oh *really*!", whereas the other's face showed "surprise at first, with both eyebrows raised in alarm." After this initial reaction, however, this librarian became very controlled and retained a neutral expression. Another librarian started aggressively biting her own lower lip as soon as Angela posed her question, an action Angela interpreted as discomfort with her inquiry.

Overall Assessment of Approachability

Ten out of twenty (50 percent) librarians received very positive comments in Angela's interpretation of the librarian's overall attitude toward her and her question. Their smiles and readiness to engage her brought forth comments such as "positive, interested in me and my question." In their first words to Angela, these librarians often said the words "gay" or "lesbian" in their paraphrase of the question, an action that increased her comfort level; for example, "She seemed fine. She didn't trip over the word 'gay' and could actually *say* it!"

Angela assessed the approachability of 30 percent (seven out of twenty) of the librarians she encountered as "cold," "reserved," or "neutral." She said their voices showed little enthusiasm, and their faces showed little or no expression. They were "professional," "a little disinterested." In one case, Angela said that her interpretation was that the librarian was "very controlled—no smile. She wasn't overtly hostile, but I didn't feel comfortable. She seemed very nervous underneath."

Three librarians received failing grades for initial verbal response, body language, and overall impression. Their facial expressions or lack of welcoming communication led Angela to conclude they were "clueless" or "terrified." After her encounter with one such librarian, Angela commented, "With her expression and wide eyes it appeared that she was giving a silent scream for help."

The Reference Interview

Angela's qualitative and quantitative responses indicate that most of the librarians conducted cursory reference interviews that were adequate, but not exemplary. Sixteen of the twenty (80 percent) uncovered Angela's desire to find an appropriate fiction book for the gay-straight alliance club meeting, and two of those sixteen went further with skilled interview techniques to uncover Angela's desire to find information about issues she might face with school administrators and the community. In four interviews, however, the librarian failed to ask any questions at all before diving into the catalog or the Web, forcing Angela to volunteer during the now-derailed interaction that a fiction book might be helpful. Once it was established that Angela wanted a novel, most librarians were satisfied to leave her inquiry at that level.

Despite the fact that the reference desks were not busy, it seemed to Angela that many librarians wanted to conclude this "non-routine" interaction as soon as possible. In three cases, Angela recorded that once the librarians clarified that she wanted gay and lesbian materials, they became even more rushed, despite the fact that no customers were waiting. During the interviews, two librarians uttered what Angela considered were disparaging remarks about her topic: one referred to gay and lesbian-related fiction as "weird fiction," while another said that she had moved teen gay and lesbian fiction to another location so the library "wouldn't offend anyone."

Search Strategies

Few librarians seemed to know where to start a catalog or Internet search, or what terms to use. Most gave up when a first try failed to locate relevant materials. Three-quarters

of them just used the word "gay" in their searches, likely because Angela used the term; they located gay adult male literature. Only two thought of the subject heading "lesbian." The two subject headings ideal for this inquiry are "gay teenagers" and "lesbian teenagers," but unfortunately, no one used them. The best librarians helped Angela negotiate her way through reference books and Web sites using search strategies that focused on gay and lesbian fiction as a genre. Most of the books they found were adult, not YA, but as Angela noted with appreciation, "At least they tried!" One librarian kept searching without success for gay and lesbian teen fiction, as she remarked that she "sees it all the time"; one just bumbled around the reference sources and the catalog, leading Angela to record that "she really didn't know what to do, but I appreciated the effort." The worst librarian remarked in a superior fashion: "As a librarian, I've seen now that there's a whole 'gay' genre. You can look it up on the Web on the computer over there." As Angela noted about this encounter, "He did nothing, and I found nothing."

Another difficulty these librarians encountered was age-appropriateness. Even though Angela clearly stated that she wanted materials for a high-school audience, three librarians produced only adult booklists or print-outs of adult library materials. Conversely, one librarian only recommended two picture books involved in a recent Vancouver area school controversy: *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads* and *Asha's Mums.* Another librarian looked for both picture books and YA books, but when she couldn't find anything she remarked, "Oh, maybe we didn't put them in there, so we wouldn't offend anyone else."

Disappointingly, only three librarians explained to Angela how to use any sources—the catalog, the Internet, journal indexes—but they did an excellent job that Angela much appreciated. Instruction of this type is always important, but to empower a youth to find information in the library about GLBT issues could literally save his or her life. Another librarian told her to "look it up on the computer," after Angela had just told him that she did not know how the catalog worked, while two librarians gave Angela the *Red Book,* a local directory of organizations that would be difficult for a teenager to navigate, but did not show her how to use it or look up the topic for her.

In one instance, the librarian conducted a cursory interview but did not follow through with any suggestions regarding finding tools or resources; she suggested instead that Angela go back to her club members to determine the type of novel they wished to read. Angela recorded this "no-help" suggestion as particularly insensitive, considering that a teenage client may have summoned all her courage to enter the library and ask the gay- and lesbian-related question, and would not likely run the gauntlet again. This librarian continued to be unhelpful by then suggesting that the "straight kids should read a gay biography, while the gay ones read a novel from a contrary [homophobic] view that's well-written. Then the gay kids will realize

'Wow, I didn't know we were seen that way.'" After recording this quote, Angela noted in fury that most gay teens are painfully aware of how they are seen by others. This same librarian closed the interview by writing down the Dewey number 028.8 (how to form a book club), and saying "So there you go . . . "

Seven librarians found booklists of GLBT resources, most compiled in-house and relevant, except for one produced in 1982 that the librarian proffered apologetically. One librarian pointed to the YA section and then pointed to appropriate OPACs for an "EBSCO search," an incomprehensible phrase to Angela. Another librarian was discouraged after finding just one book, Terry Wolverston's *Hers*, and said in frustration "I just don't know what else to do!" And she did nothing else, just stared at Angela, so Angela walked away.

At the best-staffed desk with three librarians, Angela was upset by the terms they used in their consultation and disappointed in the result. After she posed her question to one librarian, he commented that she should look in the "alternative" section, while the librarian seated beside him suggested that someone should contact an absent librarian because he "read a lot of weird fiction." The first librarian found a book list and showed it to Angela (all of these books were either checked out or at another branch), while the third librarian said there were gay authors she could look up on the catalog, but offered neither possible names nor help searching the catalog.

One librarian conducted a partial interview and started to search for sources when he suddenly became agitated, mumbled "So, if you, you know, need . . . yeah," turned around, and walked away. Angela waited for several minutes for him to reappear, but he had indeed done a disappearing act, and was nowhere to be found. In all her encounters, Angela noted that this interaction was perhaps the lowest point, as she waited, hopeful but uncomfortable and unwanted.

Only six of the twenty librarians went the extra step of accompanying Angela to the shelves to help her find the material they had located in the catalog. In three cases, no accompaniment was necessary because no resources were found.

That Crucial Concluding Statement

The RUSA Guidelines and the research of Ross and Dewdney strongly recommend that a reference interview conclude with a final question or invitation once it appears that the reference interaction is over—questions such as "Will these resources give you the information you need, or should we search in another area?" or "Please come back to the desk if you don't find what you need."[33] Such statements are designed to determine whether the librarian has fully answered the customer's inquiry and whether the customer is satisfied with the answer, and to invite the customer back to discuss the inquiry again if she needs further assistance.

Only 50 percent of librarians concluded with such a statement, a distressing omission considering that Angela's question was sensitive and multilayered, and could (and often was) be misunderstood. The best librarians (two out of twenty) completed the interview in the most highly recommended fashion with a "double-barreled" conclusion. They asked Angela if the resources found would satisfy her question, and they invited her to return for more help if needed. Nine librarians did neither, and Angela couldn't categorize one concluding communication:

> She [the librarian] printed out a list of books, told me what library they were in (at the multi-branch system), and then said "Okay" as a concluding statement. It was not a question—this was the definite end to the conversation, her closing statement.

Good Reference Interview Behaviors

The recommendations of the RUSA Guidelines and Whitlatch regarding behaviors that librarians should practice during the reference interaction were adapted to form a checklist for Angela.[34] She assessed on a four-point scale whether the librarians exhibited these behaviors.

As table 1 reveals, in less than 50 percent of cases did Angela feel that the librarians were definitely interested in her question, and only slightly more than 50 percent were definitely comfortable with her request. Librarians scored better at giving Angela their full attention, albeit for too brief a period sometimes. In seven cases, Angela felt that confidentiality was compromised: in all five cases where she felt it was "somewhat" compromised, the problem was largely unavoidable because other customers were standing close to the desk or sitting at computer terminals nearby, but Angela wished that the librarians had taken "an extra step or some extra care" to enhance the privacy of the interaction. In two cases, the confidentiality of Angela's question was definitely and unnecessarily destroyed when the librarians' loud voices caused heads to turn as they repeated Angela's question, a behavior that would alienate any GLBT youth in a public or school library.

Objective Treatment

Angela also assessed whether she felt the librarians maintained objectivity, or whether they communicated value judgments about the subject matter of her inquiry. Recognizing the inherent subjectivity of this assessment itself, Angela tried to be as specific as possible about such signs of censure. In only three of twenty encounters did she definitely perceive that the librarian disapproved of her gay- and lesbian-related subject. In all three cases, the librarians exhibited obvious body language that showed their discomfort with the topic, for example, raised eye-brows, disapproving frown, or a desire to conclude the interaction as soon as possible, even though no one was waiting at the desk. Angela summed up one such interaction in which the librarian wanted to physically distance herself from Angela as soon as possible. "The librarian made me feel unwanted. She quickly showed me just enough so I could look for the books myself, then fled."

Would Angela Return?

A crucial question when evaluating service is whether the customer would return to that same service point. Angela said that she would return to 40 percent of the libraries. In her comments about why she would return, the common elements were that she felt welcome, the librarians were able to place resources in her hands and recommend other sources, and that she received some instruction on how to locate material herself for any future inquiries. Typical of her recorded comments:

> "YES! I actually got information GSAs!! She made me feel comfortable, was willing to do searches, write down titles, find titles, show me how to search, and divide books into those available and those unavailable."

> "Yes. She was interested in me and my question, and was able to recommend novels she had read. The branch didn't seem to have most of the material on the shelf, but she offered to put holds on them."

> "Yes. Very helpful. Lots of information. No hesitation about GLBT talk. She found a booklist, explained it to me, and showed me (as she searched) how to use different search engines. A great experience."

One library to which Angela would definitely return received bouquets of praise. The librarian was enthusiastic and exhibited no signs of surprise or disapproval at Angela's question. She was very welcoming: "personal but not nosy;" conducted a great reference interview, said the words "gay and "lesbian" easily, and naturally; found appropriate resources; showed Angela how to use the catalog, the Internet, and a journal index; and then surprised Angela by saying that YA materials were not her specialty so she would like to forward Angela's question to the children's/YA librarian who would be in the library the following day. The librarian suggested that children's/YA librarian could phone Angela with more information, but Angela said that she didn't want that type of communication and suggested postal mail or e-mail as alternatives. By the end of the following day, the children's/YA librarian had e-mailed Angela with more information, and within several days, Angela received a packet with booklists, articles, and additional Web sources by postal mail. All in all, an experience that any GLBT youth would treasure.

Table 1

Reference Behaviors Exhibited by the Librarians (As Recorded by Angela)

To what extent did the librarian . . .? (N=20)

Behaviors	Not at all	Somewhat	Yes	Very much
Appear interested in your question	1	10	8	1
Appear to be comfortable with your request	2	7	8	3
Maintain eye contact	0	7	13	0
Show relaxed body posture	2	5	9	4
Give you his/her full attention	0	5	10	5
Maintain your confidentiality by being discreet	2	5	11	2
Make you feel comfortable during the interaction	3	7	6	4

Common elements among the twelve libraries to which Angela would not return were that she received negative physical reactions from the librarians, either because of their disapproval of or unfamiliarity with the subject; that she encountered abrupt or very hurried communication from the librarian; and that she received no concluding statement or question, making her feel that the librarians "sent me away."

Conclusion

A welcoming, enthusiastic, and compassionate reference librarian can indeed have a positive impact on the life of a GLBT youth as he or she struggles through the emotional quagmires of discovering the personal, physical, and societal aspects of sexual identity. The results of this research are limited, but they reveal clearly how librarian behaviors and communication were interpreted by one young lesbian youth. Her comments show the positive and negative impact of the reference interactions, and we can speculate on the possible greater impact of librarian behaviors and communication on a GLBT youth younger, more uncertain, and more vulnerable than our nineteen-year-old proxy.

In some areas, the librarians scored quite well; in only three of twenty interactions did Angela detect definite censure of her gay- and lesbian-related questions. But in most other areas, there was room for improvement. This improvement may be needed for all types of reference questions, not just for those on gay-lesbian subjects, but the important focus of this research is that deficient reference interactions occurred with a youth whom the research characterizes as being at risk, as someone for whom information and a competent, caring adult may be a lifeline.

To improve our service to GLBT youth, we need to ensure that LIS curricula include the topic of service to GLBT youth so that students are cognizant of the special needs of this client group. Practicing librarians also need to ask self-assessment questions such as the following:

❖ Do I feel confident responding to questions on GLBT topics? If not, what would I need in order to become more confident?
❖ Am I familiar with the current concerns and information needs of GLBT youth in my community?
❖ Am I aware of local GLBT resource centers and information sources to which I could refer library users?

We must work toward championing public libraries as the "institutional allies" that GLBT youth seek so desperately, in which reference librarians provide a consistently safe and supportive environment.[35] We must build on the strengths that we now exhibit as reference librarians and instead of continuing the behaviors and communication that make GLBT youth feel that we want to send them away as soon as possible, we must, in the words of McDowell, "ensure that all [GLBT] students have equal access to the information that they need in order to make sense of their lives and to build a society based on equality and mutual respect."[36] ■

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