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Psychosocial Reasons Why Patrons Avoid Seeking Help from Librarians: A Literature Review

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Abstract:

Patrons avoid asking librarians for help for a variety of psychosocial reasons. These include academic goal orientation, degree of self-regulation, perceived threats to autonomy or self-esteem, desire to avoid being stereotyped, perceptions of librarians, and feelings of confusion, fear, or anxiety. Educational psychologists and college student services professionals have published research on help seeking that is directly relevant to library patrons' behaviors. This review summarizes literature on the educational psychology of help seeking, help seeking in college student services, interpersonal dimensions of library reference services, library anxiety, the effect of librarian behaviors on patrons' perceptions of help received, and preliminary findings on help seeking in online settings.

Psychosocial Reasons Why Patrons Avoid Seeking Help from Librarians: A Literature Review

Reference librarians have long known that people who could benefit from help often do not ask for assistance. Students' reluctance to seek academic help has been investigated from the perspectives of educational psychology, student support services, and library and information science. The findings from these distinct but related points of view can add depth and nuance to librarians' understanding of patrons' reluctance to ask for help.

This literature review was developed in an iterative process of database searching, following citations, and browsing relevant publications. For the educational psychology of help-seeking, literature in student services, and online help-seeking, the ERIC and PsycINFO databases were searched using several variations of "academic AND help seeking." From articles found from database searches the author then investigated relevant works cited, including following PsycINFO's "times cited in this database" links to articles. The author also used the "cited by" feature in Google Scholar to find relevant articles that cite research most directly focused on academic help-seeking behaviors of college students. The author also browsed the most recent decade of *Reference Librarian*, *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, *Journal of College Student Development*. A similar process was used to gather literature on help-seeking in libraries, supported by the author's prior knowledge of the *RUSA Guidelines for Behavioral Performance* and related literature. The author used his best judgment to select and describe the most informative literature on academic help-seeking relevant to reference librarianship.

Educational Psychology of Help-Seeking

Psychologists' research on help seeking behaviors resides primarily within three sub-disciplines. Researchers in psychological counseling have extensively investigated motivations of individuals who could benefit from counseling for alcoholism, abuse, depression, etc., but choose not to seek help. Psychologists in organizational behavior management literature have studied employees help seeking behaviors. Research on help seeking in the contexts of counseling and employment has some relevance to academic help seeking but is not the focus of this literature review. Research on help seeking in the contexts of counseling and employment have some relevance to academic help seeking, but those bodies of research lie beyond the scope of this literature review. Here the focus will be on help-seeking behaviors in academic settings. Educational psychologists' research on psychological and interpersonal dimensions of help seeking behaviors directly informs the social dynamic that occurs whenever a library patron interacts with a reference librarian.

Early work on help-seeking behaviors centered on medical and social welfare contexts, where the primary reasons for avoiding seeking help were found to be feelings of personal inadequacy, embarrassment, and loss of self-esteem (DePaulo, 1983). What little attention help-seeking garnered in educational psychology tended to focus on help-seeking as a maladaptive

form of dependency. That perspective changed in the wake of seminal work by Sharon Nelson-Le Gall. She reconceptualized help-seeking as an adaptive learning strategy, rather than a sign of dependence (Nelson-Le Gall, 1985). Nelson-Le Gall (1985) argued that although social norms and issues of self-esteem tend to inhibit students (especially males) from asking for help, seeking assistance can be an adaptive strategy that supports a student's learning in both the short and long terms. In her view the key to the efficacy of help seeking is for the student to not merely try to complete or avoid a task, but rather to have their goal be to comprehend the material or master the problem. Academic help seeking is thus categorized into two types: executive and instrumental. Executive help seeking means to have someone else execute the task, which has the negative effect of fostering continued dependence on help providers. By contrast, instrumental or mastery-oriented help-seeking supports a student's ability to solve a problem or complete a task on their own, thus building competence as an independent, self-regulated learner (Nelson-Le Gall, 1985). Instrumental help-seeking has been found to positively correlate with final course grades, while executive help seeking and avoiding help are negatively correlated with course grades (Bembenuity & White, 2013). Researchers have therefore focused much attention on factors that may enhance students' instrumental (aka adaptive) help seeking behaviors.

One of the factors found to foster instrumental help seeking is self-regulation. A self-regulated learner independently controls their academic outcomes without need for assistance from others (Newman, 1994). The general consensus among educational psychologists is that self-regulation is vital to academic achievement (Zimmerman, 2008). Students with good academic self-regulation are more likely to seek help when appropriate (Dunn, Rakes, & Rakes, 2014). According to Newman, self-regulated learners seek help by 1) becoming aware of their lack of understanding, 2) formulating a request and deciding who to ask, 3) asking in manner appropriate to the situation and 4) utilizing the help to master the task and optimize chances of success in any subsequent help-seeking attempts (Newman, 1994). Newman's formulation is an extension of Nelson-Le Gall's observation that to initiate help seeking, individuals must be aware of their need for help, view others as resources, and enlist available help. In words that echo standard one of the ALA's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, "determine the extent of information needed," (American Library Association, 2000) Nelson-Le Gall points out that "if individuals are not aware of their own limitations or the complexity of the task at hand, then they are not likely to anticipate difficulties and take preventive action or to recover easily from difficulties encountered" (Nelson-Le Gall, 1985, p. 71). Help may not be sought simply because the individual is not aware of their need for it.

Practical and psychosocial barriers may discourage instrumental, adaptive help seeking. Practical barriers identified in studies of middle school students include rules or norms that discourage seeking help, inopportune timing, and no available competent, willing helper (Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001). Of those practical barriers, the lack of a competent helper (perceived or real) is of particular relevance to reference librarianship and will be addressed in some detail later in this review.

Psychosocial barriers occur as a natural outcome of social interactions. Communication among teachers and students, among students, and between librarians and patrons are all social interactions. Those interactions are often positive and conducive to learning, but a variety of attitudes and behaviors can cause the psychosocial dynamic to lead to less than ideal outcomes. Students may avoid seeking help out of a desire for autonomy, or because doing so threatens their self-perception of being competent. Ryan, Pintrich, and Midgley (2001) describe how self-perceptions of academic competence vary according to individuals' achievement and social goal orientations. Achievement goals may be for performance (proving ability relative to others), or for mastery of the task at hand. Individuals with a mastery goal orientation are likely to take advantage of competent help because they perceive help to be instrumental in their academic progress, although they may still avoid seeking help out of a sense that they'll learn more if they go it alone. Individuals with a performance goal orientation are focused on doing better than others and therefore place high value on receiving recognition, praise, and positive feedback. They may avoid seeking help because they perceive that asking for assistance is unpraiseworthy and an indicator they are not more competent than others. Alexitch (Alexitch, 2002) found that students who are highly oriented to receiving good grades tend to perceive help-seeking as threatening to their self-worth, and are thus less likely to seek academic help.

Social goals may be oriented toward intimacy or status. Individuals with an intimacy orientation focus on acceptance, closeness, and having more relationships. These people may be inclined to accept competent help, especially from peers. Students with a status goal orientation focus on visibility, prestige, and being popular. These individuals may avoid seeking help out of concern for not appearing cool among their peers (Ryan et al., 2001). Butler (2006) also found that students with a mastery goal orientation are more likely to seek help than are students with a performance goal orientation, and cautions that educational policies that increase competition undermine students' development of healthy achievement goal orientations.

Ryan and Pintrich (1998) modeled help-seeking as a six stage process: being aware of needing help, making the decision to seek help, choosing who to ask, deciding what type of help to get (instrumental vs. executive), implementing the help received, and reacting to the help-seeking episode. They note that social and achievement goal orientations influence the critical choice students make of whether to actually seek help, a choice well recognized as a critical juncture in the help-seeking process. A component Ryan and Pintrich add to their descriptions of social and achievement goal orientations is individuals' perceived cognitive competence. Students who perceive their competence as low are more likely to believe that seeking help is an indicator of lack of ability. High achievers are less likely to fear that seeking help indicates a lack of ability (Ryan & Pintrich, 1998). Learners with high self-efficacy generally try to solve tasks on their own, but their confidence in their ability to learn makes them prepared to take advantage of help when needed (Mäkitalo-Siegl & Fischer, 2011).

Research indicates that the students for whom seeking help is most threatening are those with low self-esteem, low perceptions of cognitive competence, and whose academic

performance is poor (Ryan & Pintrich, 1998). Such students avoid help as a strategy to protect self-worth, particularly if peers do not appear to need help, the request for help is public, or the individual perceives asking as detrimental to their self-esteem (Butler, 2006). Unfortunately, this suggests that the students most in need of help may be the ones least likely to ask for it. Seeking help entails psychological costs such as admission of inadequacy, feelings of embarrassment, and social stigma (Nadler, 1998). Under such stress individuals who do ask for help are likely to seek executive help so they can get through the discomfort as quickly as possible.

Nadler (1998, p.64) explains that persons who seek instrumental help are motivated to retain their autonomy, whereas individuals who seek executive help tend to do so out of passivity and lack of self-efficacy. Although students with low self-esteem may tend to avoid seeking instrumental help, Weiss and Knight (1980) coined the term “utility of humility” to describe potential benefits of not being overly confident of one’s knowledge and abilities. In situations where seeking additional information supports the process of making a good decision, they found that individuals with lower self-esteem may perform better because they are less likely to commit to a conclusion before verifying their decision by asking questions of competent helpers (Weiss & Knight, 1980).

Another perspective on willingness to seek help is grounded in the theory attachment style. Bowlby (1973) theorized that individuals develop secure, avoidant, or anxious-ambivalent attachment styles that influence their social orientations during times of stress. Nadler (1998) concludes that secure individuals tend to seek help at adequate levels, avoidant individuals tend to underutilize help, and anxious-avoidant individuals tend to either seek dependent help or to underutilize help from the most competent helpers available, depending on the social situation.

Help Seeking in College Student Services

Most of the aforementioned studies of students’ help seeking behavior were conducted with students in grades five through eight. Several researchers have applied the concepts of self-regulation, achievement goals, and threats to self-esteem to studies of the help seeking behaviors of college students in the context of college student services. A few of the studies reviewed in this section include peripheral reference to libraries, but the focus is on students’ experiences in learning centers and college student counseling offices. The importance of promoting appropriate help seeking behaviors is underscored by Bembenutty and White’s (2013) finding that avoiding help is significantly negatively correlated with final course grades. It is thus very important that students appropriately take advantage of help provided by professors and academic support services.

Academic support programs typically strive to increase awareness of support resources, motivate students to seek help, and promote self-regulated learning (Collins & Sims, 2006). Collins and Sims (2006) list these reasons for help avoidance: effort abandonment, overconfidence, stereotype threat, need for autonomy, and threat to self-esteem. Effort

abandonment is simply giving up trying (or never trying in the first place). Overconfidence stems from overestimating one's abilities relative to peers or relative to professors' expectations. Stereotype threat is the fear of confirming a negative stereotype, e.g. women in engineering avoiding help out of perceived risk of being thought less capable than their male classmates. Both need for autonomy and desire to avoid revealing incompetence inhibit students from seeking help from the most competent helpers available. Such students are more likely to either seek help from peers or choose to go it alone (Collins & Sims, 2006).

Karabenick and Knapp (1991) found that students with high self-esteem who engaged in a variety of achievement-oriented activities were most likely to take advantage of help, and those with low self-esteem were more likely to regard seeking help as threatening. Most troubling and challenging to helping professionals in academic settings is that the students who need help most are least likely to seek it. Karabenick and Knapp (1991) correlated frequency of seeking help with academic achievement. They found that high-achieving students seek help relatively infrequently, help is most often sought and needed by students receiving grades in the B- to C+ range, but failing students are very unlikely to utilize available help. In fact, help seeking approached zero at grades of D and below (Karabenick & Knapp, 1988). Poorly performing students' negative emotions surrounding their ability and self-worth intensify the psychological cost of seeking help. This problem is compounded by failing students' tendency to attribute their failure to their innate ability rather than to their level of effort (Karabenick & Knapp, 1988). How students attribute academic performance influences willingness to seek help. A student who attributes poor performance to luck or excuses is less likely to receive appropriate academic help than is the student who realizes the answer is hard work, especially when the student is well informed of how the help can be potential useful (Ames & Lau, 1982).

These psychosocial motivations to avoid help result in competent helpers in academic support services experiencing many instances of students who'd prefer to go it alone, or seek immediate executive help, or seek help through covert means, or place higher value on preserving self-esteem than on receiving clearly needed assistance (Collins & Sims, 2006). Wimer and Levant (2011) found that male students who endorse a traditional masculinity ideology (being recognized as successful and never showing weakness) are especially prone to avoiding help. They found a significant, strong correlation ($\alpha = .66$) between need for self-reliance and help-seeking avoidance.

In addition to these reasons that college students avoid seeking help from academic support services, reluctance to avoid competent help is exacerbated by misunderstanding or ignorance of the help available. Students may believe they are wasting a helper's time, may feel intimidated or nervous, or may feel so lost they fail to be aware of available services (Robinson & Reid, 2007). Assistance providers should be aware that students who are most threatened by the act of seeking help are most likely to seek the quick fix of executive help. Bembenutty and White (2013) found a significant correlation ($\alpha = .64$) between help avoidance and executive help seeking. Knowledge of the tendency for students reluctant to seek help to seek a quick fix can

inform the strategies help providers use to assist such students (Collins & Sims, 2006). Quick fix answers might be immediately followed with instrumental help on how to perform the relevant task.

If a student does reach the threshold of recognizing a need for help, they must then decide from whom or where to get assistance. Factors that enter into their decision include perceived quality of the service, accessibility, anticipated time and energy required, social relationship with the helper, and the aforementioned psychosocial motivations. Somewhat surprisingly in the context of other research reviewed here, Xu, Tan, and Yang (2006) found that perceived quality of the source of information was the most important factor in the decision of whom to ask for help. They defined source quality as the reliability, relevance, scope, and novelty of the information the helper provides.

Students from ethnic or racial minorities and first-generation college students may have somewhat different help-seeking attitudes. Gloria, Herd, and Navarro (Gloria, Hird, & Navarro, 2001) recommend that student affairs professionals should be aware of and adapt to local cultural contexts, particularly the risk that stereotype threat will affect minority students' willingness to seek help. Stereotype threat occurs in situations where members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists can fear being reduced to that stereotype (Steele, 1997). Emotional reactions to stereotype threat in a particular setting, e.g. a research presentation in a college class, can cause students to disidentify from the situation in order to avoid damage to sense of self (Steele, 1997). Self-worth protection can severely undermine motivation. By withdrawing effort, a student can attribute failure to lack of effort rather than to lack of ability, thereby reducing the threat of failure to one's self-esteem (Thompson, Davidson, & Barber, 1995). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may be particularly susceptible to withdrawing effort, especially if a language barrier is present (Stanton-Salazar, Chávez, & Tai, 2001)

The key to minimizing stereotype threat is to create an academic environment that allows diverse students to have a feeling of cultural continuity and belonging, rather than a sense of being alienated, discriminated against, or stigmatized. In her study of the influence of diverse students' perceptions of the usefulness of academic support, Madni (Madni, 2008) reports an inverse relation between students' acculturation in the academic environment and satisfaction with services. Encouragingly, she found that among an array of ethnic and situational factors, the only predictive variable for students' likeliness to seek help was knowledge of support services (Madni, 2008).

Having instructors who ethnically match students is a way to minimize stereotype threat, but Brown and Dobbins (L. M. Brown & Dobbins, 2004) note that the key factor is that students believe the teacher is culturally aware and non-biased. Madni (Madni, 2008) put it this way, "What is of utmost importance is that the individuals aiding ethnically diverse students are culturally sensitive, competent, and aware" (p. 113). Many students are quite resilient and find ways to thrive in an unfamiliar culture. For example, Gloria, Castellanos and Orozco (Gloria,

Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005) found that Latina college students felt confident they could overcome barriers, using positive, planned action to cope with difficulties. Yet it is important to be aware that members of historically stigmatized groups may tend to be more sensitive to issues of social belonging, and that interventions may help. In their study of belonging uncertainty among Black college students, Walton and Cohen (Walton & Cohen, 2007) found that an intervention to send the message that hardship and doubt are common to all first year students, and not unique to them, improved those students' academic outcomes.

Social-psychological interventions that alter students' mind-sets hold much promise for improving achievement. While not magic, they can remove negative thoughts that limit success, allowing students to enjoy self-reinforcing recursive processes of effort, success, academic attainment, and motivation to continue to work toward a goal (Yeager & Walton, 2011). Spitzer and Aronson (Spitzer & Aronson, 2015) describe and evaluate eight types of interventions that have been shown to reduce threats to identity and improve academic achievement: meditation, exposure to role models, writing about fears, learning that intelligence is malleable ("growth mindset"), thinking about who they want to be in the future ("possible selves"), affirming one's values, boosting sense of belonging, cooperative learning. Yeager and Walton (2011) wrote a meta-analysis on the success of four types of interventions: learning to attribute success to hard work, mitigating stereotype threat by learning that core intelligence is malleable, imagining possible selves at the end of overcoming challenges, increasing the personal relevance of coursework. Impacts from these were significant and long-lasting, but they note the difficulty of scaling them up. To be successful such interventions have to be stealthy to avoid stigmatizing students, not lose the personal impact on each individual, and be based on both theoretical and contextual expertise (Yeager & Walton, 2011).

Walton and Cohen's (2011) intervention to boost sense of belonging among African American college students was particularly effective. They had students read survey results regarding how seniors struggled as freshmen with feeling they belonged. The students wrote a personal response, then video recorded their response. The students were told the videos would be used to help future freshmen. This encouraged the participants to perceive the intervention as a way to benefit others, thereby avoiding the stereotype threat of being of a group that needs special intervention to feel a sense of belonging. They found that after three years this intervention closed the achievement gap between African Americans and European Americans by 52% (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Library literature on interpersonal dimensions of reference service

The educational psychology literature on help seeking is not frequently cited in library literature, but that does not mean librarians are unaware of the psychosocial issues investigated in the studies reviewed above. Samuel Green's (1876) seminal article on reference librarianship in the first volume of *Library Journal* notes the critical importance of establishing personal relations with patrons to make them feel at ease to ask questions and be treated with sympathy,

cheerfulness, and patience. He emphasized that interpersonal competence promotes learning, aids collection development, markets the positive benefits of the library and performs a public service (Green, 1876). Bunge's (1984) review of the library literature on interpersonal relations makes it abundantly clear that best practice has always included sensitivity, respect, empathy, and tact, all behaviors implicit in the desired attributes of helpers identified by educational psychologists. In an observational study of students with a fear of talking, Lederman (1984) found that people with communication apprehension were well served by librarians sensitive to individuals' anxiety to talk with others. She noted that if the librarian is a trained and sensitive communicator, the reference interview can be a positive learning experience for anxious patrons (1984).

Librarians have long been aware of and sensitive to patrons' reluctance to ask questions. Taylor (1968) noted that patrons may avoid asking questions based on their perceptions of the quality of help they will receive. He defined four levels of information need librarians should be aware of and sensitive to: visceral, conscious, formalized, and compromised. The visceral is ill-defined and requires a good reference interview to bring to a conscious ability to articulate the need. Once made conscious, the need becomes formalized by making it fit the context of tools at hand. Since discovery tools are not perfect, compromise is struck between the ideal information and what is actually available. Swope and Katzer (1972) found that sixty-five percent of patrons at Syracuse's Carnegie Library had questions they would not ask a librarian. Reasons identified for avoiding asking a question included past negative experience, a sense that the question was too simple (students did not want to appear stupid), and unwillingness to bother the librarian (Swope & Katzer, 1972). Unmet needs for help have not diminished in the age of Google. A recent Project Information Literacy Report found that 74% of college freshmen struggled with conducting efficient searches, in part because they come to college with deeply ingrained habits of merely searching Google and little if any experience using databases (Head, 2013). Many freshmen find research to be nerve wracking, foreign, or terrifying, and 17% report that asking for help is difficult (Head, 2013).

Published investigations into the role of library patrons' reasons to seek or avoid a librarian's help became more numerous after the publication of Constance Mellon's (1986) theory of library anxiety and Carol Kuhlthau's (1988) model of the cognitive and affective aspects of students' search processes. Mellon (1986) analyzed students' journal entries describing their search processes and found that seventy-five to eight-five percent of English composition students described an initially anxious response to a library research assignment. Students described their reaction to library research with terms like "scary," "overpowering," "lost," "helpless," "confused," "and fear of the unknown" (Mellon, 1986). Kuhlthau (1988) also used students' search logs to investigate their thoughts and feelings regarding library search processes and found similarly high levels of anxiety and confusion, particularly during the topic selection phase of research projects. In a subsequent study, Kuhlthau (1991) found that students' uncertainty, confusion, and frustration peak early in the research process when they have only

vague, unclear thoughts about their topic. She aptly summarizes a typical affective reaction to having to use the library by quoting a student, “Uncertainty is in the head but anxiety is in the pit of the stomach” (Kuhlthau, 1991, p.370).

Bailey (1997) explicitly built upon the work of Mellon and Kuhlthau in his exploration of the reasons students fail to seek assistance from librarians. He found that two thirds of students who needed assistance sought help from library staff. The prime reason students cited for not seeking help was that they got all the help they needed from other sources. Other reasons for not seeking help were a sense that one should know without asking, the librarian seemed too busy, and a perception that the librarian would be unable to help (Bailey, 1997). Interestingly and in contrast to other studies, Bailey (1997) found no gender difference in willingness to seek help, and did not find embarrassment or fear of revealing ignorance to be a significant factor in students’ decisions to avoid seeking help. Hatchard and Crocker (1990) similarly found that about a third of students reported a reluctance to seek help from librarians. The characteristics students thought most important in a librarian were thorough knowledge of the library, friendliness, and a pleasant demeanor (Hatchard & Crocker, 1990).

Interpersonal dimensions of encounters with reference librarians powerfully influence levels of patron satisfaction. How the interaction leaves them feeling is equally or even more important than the accuracy of answers to patrons’ questions. Hernon and McClure (Hernon & McClure, 1986) found that reference librarians gave correct answers to reference questions fifty-five percent of the time. More than twenty studies using Hernon and McClure’s method found similarly low rates of accurate responses (Bopp & Smith, 2001). But Durrance (1989) found that despite the low success rate, sixty-three percent of library patrons were willing to return to ask the staff member a question at a later time. She found the key variables to success were good interpersonal skills, sound reference interviewing technique, and ability to approach the question effectively. Getting the answer right was still important to patrons, but the interpersonal dimension was a stronger indicator of whether they would be willing to return (Durrance, 1989).

Library Anxiety

Library patrons’ sense of confusion, fear, and feelings of being lost were described as library anxiety by Constance Mellon (1986). Interest in the prevalence and varieties of library anxiety gained important impetus with Sharon Bostick’s (1992) development of the Library Anxiety Scale. Van Kampen (2004) tested the internal consistency and construct validity of the scale and found it to be a useful tool for determining which aspects of the library and information search processes are barriers to students’ success. Numerous researchers employed Bostick’s validated scale of library anxiety in studies of its prevalence and impact on students’ behaviors. Carlile’s (2007) review of the library anxiety literature cites twenty-three published studies on psychological barriers to library use. A common thread is the need to recognize patron anxiety and make the library as comfortable as possible. Comfort levels may be increased through

instruction and positive interactions with librarians. A positive atmosphere is established by librarians being approachable, helpful, friendly, and interested (Carlile, 2007).

Discussions of how to reduce library anxiety often note that students need to be made aware that it is normal and understandable that they feel frustrated with unavoidably complex library systems (Keefer, 1993). Keefer (1993) concludes that no amount of signage or handouts can successfully communicate with a patron overwhelmed with anxiety. Atlas (2005) argues that librarians cannot solve the problem alone, asserting that students are responsible for exerting the effort to take advantage of available help to learn how to use the library.

Services designed to reduce anxiety require sympathetic understanding of the psychosocial aspects of transactions with patrons, including being sensitive to the possibility that some populations may be more prone to anxiety than others. Jiao, Onwuegbuzie and Daly (1997) found that students with English as a second language, those who work full time, and those who never attended a library instruction session scored highest in anxiety on the Library Anxiety Scale. Participation in library instruction reduces library anxiety, particularly on the “barriers with staff” subscale, because personal contact reduces anxious feelings about asking for help (Van Scoyoc, 2003). Whether through instruction, reference, or other means librarians continue to design, redesign, and experiment with ways to mitigate students’ reluctance to seek help because of fear or confusion regarding library services (L. J. Brown, 2011).

Psychosocial Dimensions of Help-seeking in Libraries

Investigations into patrons’ anxieties surrounding library use implicitly acknowledge the psychosocial dimension of their experience. A few investigators have explicitly examined the educational psychology of interpersonal encounters with librarians. Keefer and Karabenick (1993) described the interpersonal complexity of library patrons’ help seeking process by combining theories of the search process with the educational psychology of help seeking. Students most likely to take advantage of librarians’ help are those actively engaged in their learning, those who attribute success to effort, and those willing to accept the costs of seeking help (time and effort, feelings of debt to the help provider, and threat to self-esteem). Frustration with the search process and fear of being exposed as ignorant highlight the need for empathetic, non-judgmental assistance. Online help may reduce students’ feelings of being “on stage,” and face-to-face visits to classes introduce students to the acceptability and desirability of seeking help from librarians (Keefer & Karabenic, 1998).

Pellegrino (2012) specifically looked at the impact of class visits on students’ willingness to ask librarians for help. Noting that patrons may avoid help because they expect to be dissatisfied embarrassed, or not given useful help, she found that providing at least one personal connection with a librarian and encouraging them to ask for help does reach at least some students. Professors’ urging students to seek librarians’ help was the most significant influence on students’ likelihood of doing so (Pellegrino, 2012). Egan (1992) in fact argues that only the

teacher is in a position to effectively link library use to classroom assignments. Regardless of how well librarians are aware of the nuances of an assignment, Robinson and Reid (2007) found that above all else, students need to believe that their question is important and that it will be dealt with courteously, promptly, and effectively.

College students have a generally positive attitude towards librarians, but many are unaware of the level of competent help they can provide (Fagan, 2002). Undergraduates tend to have little awareness of the level of professional training librarians bring to reference services (Hernon & Pastine, 1977). Lack of knowledge of librarians' qualifications to provide competent, professional help has also been recognized in the United Kingdom (Bickley & Corral, 2011) and Hong Kong (Chiu, 2000). The lack of awareness is of particular concern since belief that no competent helper is available is an important reason why patrons avoid seeking help from the professional librarians most able to assist them. Miller and Murillo (2011) found that students' lack of awareness leads them to seek research help not only from their professors, but also from friends, family members, and public librarians. Similar patterns of students seeking help from familiar but less qualified sources have been identified by Pellegrino (2014), Ismail (2013), and Head and Eisenberg (2009). Foster (2007) dubbed students' tendency to avoid librarians and instead either go it alone or ask the most readily available source the "Mommy model of service." Librarians might address this concern through marketing campaigns and describing levels of skills and training in instruction sessions and reference interactions (Fagan, 2002).

The initial interaction a patron has is critical for instilling a willingness to return for help, but students' comfort with seeking help from librarians is a process that develops over time. Gatten (Gatten, 2004) argues that the process should be informed by students' normal processes of psychosocial development. These developmental processes as described by Chickering and Reisser (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) are characterized by increasingly sophisticated abilities to handle cognitive complexities and form mature interpersonal relationships. Freshmen in early stages of developing competence and managing emotions will likely struggle with research topic selection and be reluctant to seek help (Gatten, 2004). Gatten (Gatten, 2004) urges librarians to adapt to students' often nonlinear development by being prepared with a repertoire of ways to teach information literacy in recognition that information literacy requires levels of ability that take time to develop.

Behavioral Performance of Librarians

How can librarians' behaviors overcome patrons' reluctance to seek help? At bare minimum librarians should carefully avoid behaviors that reinforce patrons' perceptions that seeking help will be a negative experience (Ross & Dewdney, 1998). That sounds basic, but in practice it is very difficult to consistently achieve. The reference interview as a process wherein the patron must assume that the librarian is competent, and the librarian in turn must assume the patron can make his or her needs clear (Katz, 1992), p.46). As Dewdney and Michell (Dewdney & Michell, 1996) demonstrated so clearly and thoroughly in a study introduced by a students'

confusion of “Oranges and Peaches” for “The Origin of Species,” communication accidents are so likely that it is remarkable reference transactions are successful as frequently as they are. Patrons’ queries are often not at all clear, and librarians may misunderstand or misinterpret what the patron is asking. Katz (Katz, 1992) thus emphasized that the librarian must try to put themselves in the patron’s place, be approachable, and be attuned to verbal and nonverbal cues.

Noting that subtle psychological barriers can impede effective communication, Fine (Fine, 1995) emphasized the need to be attuned to human behavior, particularly the tendencies to follow the path of least resistance and to persist with strategies that have worked in the past (even when circumstances have changed). Students tend to come to college with the skills of being taught far more than the skills of how to learn, so past behaviors may have to be overcome for students to become active, self-regulated learners willing to seek needed help (Pillai, 2010). Once ready to seek help, patrons may still be reluctant due to embarrassment, anxiety, fear of appearing ignorant, or unwillingness to devote the time (Fitzpatrick, Moore, & Lang, 2008).

Interest in the influence of librarian behavior and patrons’ willingness to ask for help was a major focus of Gers and Seward’s (Gers & Dyson, 1985) statewide study of the quality of reference services in Maryland. They looked specifically at the impacts on patron satisfaction of resources, workloads and wait times, and librarians’ behaviors. Librarian behavior was found to be by far the most important factor in patrons’ satisfaction, and they noted that the correct answer was provided in every single instance that the librarian patiently persisted with the transaction until the specific question was identified (Gers & Dyson, 1985). The important behavioral variables in the reference interview process Gers and Seward described created a model that was subsequently developed by the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association. The critical point driven home by their study was that the variables most important in performance were those directly within the control of the individual librarian (Gers & Dyson, 1985), p.33).

Motivated with that knowledge and librarians’ long familiarity with patron reluctance to seek help, RUSA formed an ad hoc committee in 1992 to develop behavioral guidelines for reference and information service. First published in 1996, the guidelines recommended “observable behavioral attributes that could be correlated with positive patron perceptions of reference librarian performance” ((RASD Ad Hoc Committee on Behavioral Guidelines for Reference and Information Services, 1996)p.200). The guidelines for approachability are based on the premise that librarians should “make the patron feel comfortable in a situation which may be perceived as intimidating, risky, confusing, and overwhelming (p.201). The Guidelines also called for demonstrating a high degree of interest and attentively listening, both important ways to make the patron feel at ease. The accompanying bibliography (p.203) includes a number of studies focused on the interpersonal aspects of patron satisfaction while seeking help in the library. Aside from the aforementioned reference to making the patron comfortable, the RUSA Guidelines do not explicitly address psychosocial reasons for patrons’ reluctance to seek help, but the behaviors recommended are well designed to mitigate help avoidance once the patron has

made an effort to ask a question. The RUSA Guidelines were updated in 2004 and again in 2013 to incorporate guidelines for service by telephone, chat, e-mail, etc. where visual and non-verbal clues are absent, and to provide specific examples of behaviors that meet the guidelines (RUSA, 2013).

Help-seeking online

What effect does interaction in online environments have on people's willingness to seek help? Answers in the literature are mixed. Karabenick and Knapp (Karabenick & Knapp, 1988) hypothesized that computer mediated communication should be very conducive for help seeking, especially for patrons in highly evaluative conditions and those for whom publicly asking for help carries a high cost to their self-esteem. Online communication should facilitate help seeking because it increases psychological distance, is less time sensitive, and lessens status differences between helpers and those asking for assistance (J. A. Keefer & Karabenic, 1998). Kitsantas and Chow (Kitsantas & Chow, 2007) found that students in traditional, hybrid, and online courses preferred to ask for help from instructors electronically, primarily through e-mail. Their study did not investigate willingness or contact preference with other competent help givers.

Preference for online help may be convenient but at the cost of lower quality. One study of distance learners found that students close enough to campus to visit in person preferred face-to-face consultations with librarians (Tang & Tseng, 2014). There are several possible reasons for this, one of the more surprising being students' experience of one on one personal consultations being quicker and more efficient than chat or e-mail (Magi & Mardeusz, 2013). Personal, face-to-face help sessions increase students' confidence, inspire, and build comfort with the library and relationships with librarians (Magi & Mardeusz, 2013). A study of personal versus online library instruction found that computer-assisted instruction was not as effective at making students comfortable with using the library (Van Scoyoc, 2003). Yet online help still contains a social component. Karabenick (2011) notes that social influence can be direct, imagined ("what would my friends think?") or implied ("someone's going to find out I asked for help").

Research on the effectiveness of help features incorporated into interactive learning environments suggests that online help features are generally not used effectively (Aleven, Stahl, Schworm, Fischer, & Wallace, 2003). Students may perceive online embedded help as one more (unnecessary) thing to deal with, and it is difficult to make it context-sensitive enough to be perceived as directly relevant (Aleven et al., 2003). Online help can negatively impact learning outcomes if it is overused for executive help, with the student's goal to be to finish quickly rather than learn the material (Aleven, McLaren, & Koedinger, 2006). In the library context, effective help can never be automated. Knowledge and good interpersonal skills are required to elicit a patron's real question and to keep them interested and engaged while that question is translated into the system's language (Curry, 2005). How well online help can successfully incorporate the essential interpersonal element is a question ripe for experimentation and study.

Conclusion

In a perfect world patrons would come to us with the goal of mastering a task, armed with high self-esteem, comfortably confident that asking a question will lead to success. But many patrons avoid asking librarians for help because they have performance goal orientations, low academic self-regulation, perceived threats to autonomy or self-esteem, or desires to avoid stereotypes. Patrons may avoid help because of perceptions of librarians or due to feelings of confusion, fear, or anxiety.

What can be done to improve students' effective use of help? Interventions to increase help seeking competence can address cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of the learning environment (Karabenick & Dembo, 2011). Cognitive skills include formulating goals to monitor performance, analyzing tasks, and reviewing errors. The social aspect of help-seeking can be facilitated by "skillstreaming," a five-step process designed to provide experience with deciding what to ask, whom to ask, thinking of different ways to word the question, choosing the appropriate time to ask, and asking (Goldstein, 1997).

The emotional aspect is addressed by creating an environment that encourages mastery learning and by making clear the norms for help seeking (Karabenick & Dembo, 2011). The most basic message for librarians is the research reinforces long experience that students are uncomfortable asking for help. Explicit instructions on when and how to seek help should be provided by librarians and classroom instructors. Whenever possible, librarians should provide instrumental help, since the quick fix of executive help does little to build students' information literacy, and may indeed undermine future academic success. Madni (Madni, 2008) states that essential components of instrumental help are providing effective examples of procedures and concepts, conveying a step-by-step process as opposed to providing a solution, and probing students looking for a quick fix with questions and prompts to encourage them to engage.

The most encouraging and promising message from the literature reviewed here is that relatively quick and simple social psychological interventions have the potential to significantly improve attitudes towards learning and willingness to seek help. Given Madni's (2008) finding of the central importance of knowledge of support services and the success of interventions described by Yeager and Walton (2011) and Spitzer and Aronson (2015), it is reasonable to conclude that librarians should develop exercises that not only effectively convey search processes and the usefulness of reference help, but also encourage students to reflect on their personal beliefs and emotions. This idea is hardly new to reference librarianship, as the groundbreaking work of Mellon (1986) and Kulthau (1988) were based on student's personal logs of their research processes.

Many opportunities remain for trying strategies and studying how well they overcome patrons' reluctance to seek help. Topics worth investigating include:

- What social psychological interventions are most effective at increasing students' comfort with using library resources and seeking reference help?
- Which instructional techniques or librarian behaviors most effectively promote academic self-regulation?
- When working with a student seeking executive help (a "quick fix"), what are the most effective ways to help that student develop an appreciation for instrumental help?
- Are forced interventions with help avoidant, failing students feasible or desirable?
- Do students who avoid seeking help in person use library online help guides, FAQs, or videos?
- How might the concepts measured by the Library Anxiety Scale be updated for online library environments?
- To what degree do students' academic help seeking behaviors apply to the behaviors of public library patrons?

The myriad reasons patrons may avoid seeking help include many that librarians cannot control. It is an issue with no complete solution. But awareness of and sympathy for patrons' psychosocial reasons for being reluctant to ask for help can inform improvements to library services.

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