COMMUNICATION THEORY APPLIED TO THE REFERENCE ENCOUNTER: AN ANALYSIS OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS\textsuperscript{1}

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Dimensions of interpersonal communication perceived to be integral to success or failure in academic reference interactions are identified through the use of the critical incident technique. Forty-seven critical incidents recalled by twenty-seven library users and nine librarians are analyzed from the theoretical perspective of interpersonal communication developed by Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson. This study is the first to be published that applies the heuristically rich relational theory from the communication field to library interactions. Content and relational dimensions that have an impact on librarian and user critical incidents are identified, such as attitude, relationship quality, information, knowledge base, and approachability. Interpersonal relationships are major themes in incidents recalled by library users. Librarians give relatively more weight to content dimensions dealing with quality of information given but also perceive relationship qualities to be important. The value of applying communication theory to study of the reference interaction is demonstrated. In addition, this research also illustrates the importance of incorporating the user's point of view. Evidence presented argues for a new model of the librarian-user reference interaction that recognizes the vital importance of relational messages that are communicated in the reference encounters along with the information transferred.

Surrounded by texts, indexing systems, and information technologies of all kinds, the encounter between the reference librarian and the user

\textsuperscript{1} This article is taken from my dissertation \cite{1}. I would like to thank my committee, Brent Ruben (chair), Hal Beder, David Carr, Linda Lederman, and Hartmut Mokros. Special thanks are also due to John V. Richardson Jr., the anonymous referees from \textit{Library Quarterly}, Katherine G. Hendrix, and Gary Radford for their insightful editorial suggestions. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 80th annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, November 19–22, 1994, New Orleans, Louisiana, and the 1995 annual meeting of the American Library Association, June 22–29, 1995, Chicago, Illinois.

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0024-2519/96/6602-0002$01.00
represents the human interface between the library's knowledge and the library user's need for information [2, 3]. For the user, this interface is a pivotal point at which complexities of the academic library are explained and its knowledge base made accessible or at which the library is made forbidding and its contents made to appear inaccessible. An understanding of the interpersonal communication processes involved in the reference encounter has the potential to reveal much about the perceived success or failure of a particular library experience for both librarians and users. Unfortunately, few studies have focused on these processes [4], especially from the user's viewpoint.

Traditionally, the evaluation of librarian performance has centered on the ability of librarians to find the correct answer to factual questions [5–7]. From this perspective, the user becomes little more than the yardstick against which one can determine the “correctness” of any particular piece of information the librarian has retrieved. William Katz [8] argues that this view leads to the tendency of librarians to focus on the quality of the information exchange, rather than on the interpersonal qualities of the relationship between librarian and user (see [5, 7, 9–13]). As a consequence, librarians have come to be stereotypically viewed as stern and forbidding [14], and their help is therefore sought often only as a last, desperate, resort [15, 16].

Despite the development of a more user-centered approach as exemplified by the work of Charles Bunge [17], Nicholas Belkin [18, 19], Brenda Dervin and Patricia Dewdney [20], Dewdney [21], and Carol Kuhlthau [22], Ruth Morris still feels justified in making the observation that information professionals have had a “nagging suspicion that the needs of users were not well understood” and that, “not surprisingly, research had failed to inform practice” [3, p. 20].

The field of communication studies, in contrast, has a rich tradition of research dealing with the dynamics of face-to-face encounters in a subspecialty known as “interpersonal communication” [23, 24]. This tradition has the potential to provide important insights into the dynamics of the reference encounter by setting up a theoretical foundation with which to describe, analyze, and evaluate the communicative behaviors of librarians and users, their relationships, and their perceptions of success and failure. This potential has received some recognition by library and information science scholars. For example, Brenda Dervin [25] challenged the application of information theory to the task of question negotiation in the reference interview and provided a discussion of the theoretical issues. Stuart Glogoff [26] reviewed communication theory and its role in the reference interaction and encouraged librarians to broaden their knowledge of this discipline to improve their understanding and to promote effective communication with users. Dewdney [21]
studied the effect of training in communication skills on user satisfaction. The present study extends the application of a communication-based approach to the reference interaction through use of the perspective provided by the theory of "relational communication" and the critical incident technique [27], taking into account both librarian and user viewpoints.

Relational Communication and the Reference Encounter

The relational communication framework, developed by Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson [28] and by Erving Goffman [29] has provided the basis for a large body of communication research (for example, see [30–33]). This approach to face-to-face interactions differentiates messages into two dimensions: the content and the relational. Following Jurgen Ruesch and Gregory Bateson [34], content dimensions are defined as the report aspect of a message (that is, what is being said, the information being conveyed). Relational dimensions signify the command aspect of a message—how the message is said—that define the relationship between the two participants. This perspective argues that more than correct answers to questions are being communicated in reference interactions. Librarians are also providing relational information in their verbal and nonverbal expressions. This relational information is communicated through linguistic cues and gestures that convey approachability, rapport building, and empathy. These acts influence the ability of the librarian to understand successfully the user's need and to establish a positive relationship.

Library literature suggests that interpersonal communication between librarians and those seeking their help is not always satisfactory [4, 15] and can lead to expressions of dissatisfaction and frustration [16]. Even when the appropriate information is obtained, the user may still leave the interaction with a negative impression of the librarian and of the library experience in general (see [1, 35]). Clearly, the relational needs of users have to be met along with their informational needs. An understanding of the relationship between interpersonal communication processes and librarians' and users' perceptions of the reference encounter will provide a basis for articulating problems as well as possible solutions.

To this end a research study was designed that explores these perceptions using a qualitative methodology. Two research questions were addressed: (1) Can aspects of relational communication perceived as critical in reference encounters be identified? and (2) Do those aspects identified by users differ from those of librarians and, if so, how?
Method

Informants
For this exploratory study, perceptions of reference encounters were collected through interviews at three academic institutions in the northeast: a public community college, a private university, and a public college. Nine volunteer librarian informants were selected (three from each site) through a stratified random method to include one person who worked weekdays, one on weekends, and one in the evening during one semester. The librarians included two males and seven females, with a mean age of forty-one years. Their years of experience in academic reference work ranged from two to ten years, with a mean of 4.72 years. All held a Masters in Library Science, with three having a second subject Masters.

Library users were selected as informants at random times stratified to include weekends, weekdays, and evenings. Twenty-seven users were interviewed (nine from each site), including twelve males and fifteen females. Users had a mean age of twenty-five years and a variety of majors. Educational levels ranged from high school to Ph.D. level. Thirteen users attended the site institutions, twelve attended other colleges (or high schools), and two were not students.

Although the sample size is small, this is often the case for qualitative research [36]. The sample was taken from three diverse institutions and at the designated stratified times to ensure a rich sample representing a variety of types of users and librarians. There was a greater number of user informants because the emphasis in this study was on integrating the user's point of view.

Procedure
All interviews were conducted individually and in private. Librarians were interviewed at a time of mutual convenience. Users were asked to participate after they had approached the reference desk at the selected times and completed a reference interview. A total of twenty-nine users were asked to participate and two (7 percent) refused because of time contraints. Those agreeing to participate were taken to a nearby room and asked to sign informed consent forms before the interviews began. The interviews lasted approximately ten to fifteen minutes and were audiotaped.

Following the procedures of John Flanagan's [27] critical incident technique, each informant was asked to recall and describe (a) a successful reference interaction either recently or in the past, (b) an unsuccessful reference interaction, and (c) the factors that made the interaction successful or unsuccessful. Informants were asked to give their defini-
tions of what constituted "successful" and "unsuccessful." Rather than imposing standard definitions of success or failure, the analysis sought to identify the criteria used by the participants to assess positive or negative perceptions. This approach is an integral part of the critical incident technique [27], which allows for "the emergence—rather than the imposition—of an evaluation schema, and focus on the events and dimensions of the . . . experience which are most salient, memorable, and most likely to be retold to others" [37, p. 3].

Analysis: Critical Incident Technique
Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were qualitatively analyzed using the critical incident technique [27]. Flanagan defines a critical incident as "any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the persons performing the act" [27, p. 327]. The critical incident is used to gather and analyze the most memorable experiences, not necessarily the most recent. The technique is used to evaluate and identify ways to increase effectiveness of service in a variety of applied fields, including library and information science [38]. As an exploratory method, used to generate descriptions of various domains of study, the technique has been shown to be both reliable and valid [39, 40] and appropriate for the description of communication processes.

Collected incidents were sorted into categories and classified according to whether the crux of the perceived success or failure was associated with primarily relational or primarily content dimensions. Words and phrases that gave indications of primarily content or relational aspects were noted in the transcripts. Content-oriented statements focused on information exchange, while relational-oriented statements dealt with feelings and attitudes that were indicative of the nature of the librarian-user relationship. A second analysis of the incidents, to determine the underlying relational or content themes, was accomplished by close and repeated readings of the transcripts for each critical incident, guided by development of a category scheme based on Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson's [28] relational theory.

Results

A total of forty-seven critical incidents were collected, fourteen from the librarians and thirty-three from the users. Relational and content factors were found to be associated with both "unsuccessful" and "successful" interactions for librarians and users. Examples of content-
oriented and relational-oriented statements from both librarians and users are given in Appendixes A and B.

**Librarians' Critical Incident Themes**

Four themes emerged from the librarians' fourteen critical incidents, two related to primarily content factors—"information" and "knowledge base"—and two to relational factors—"attitude" and "relationship quality." Overall, the relational and content dimensions were represented equally, with seven relational factors (six "attitude" and one "relationship quality") and seven content factors (four "information" and three "knowledge base"). The excerpts below define these four themes with examples from representative librarians' statements.

**Attitude theme.**—User's attitude was an important dimension for librarians, defined as the librarian's or user's perception of the demeanor of the other participant in the interaction. Perceptions of attitude were inferred by the informants from the verbal and nonverbal communication of librarians or users with whom they have interacted. Attitude was the top-ranked category, relational in nature and evident in six (43 percent) out of fourteen incidents. Five out of the six incidents classified as relational were perceived as unsuccessful and attributed to users' poor "attitude toward the librarian or toward the task." These centered on users who were perceived as (a) closed minded, (b) angry, (c) arrogant, (d) obnoxious, or (e) impatient, as these two quotations illustrate:

He already had in his mind what he wanted me to produce and I had a lot of trouble getting from him enough information to even look for what he wanted because he had a closed mind.

And you know he kept saying "well you we've [sic] got to find this information" and I just couldn't produce it and he was very angry, he was angry when he started, he got angrier at me because I didn't seem to understand what it was he was trying to say, and I did understand what it was, it was just that I couldn't produce the information.

Another incident involved a positive user attitude and openness. When asked what made this incident successful, the librarian replied: "I think her attitude, she was willing to explain those things, [when] I asked her questions."

**Information theme.**—The second highest ranked theme for librarians was information, accounting for four (29 percent) of fourteen incidents. "Information" centers on content and is defined as the librarian's ability to (a) provide information delivery, (b) provide information access, (c)
fill an information need, and (d) be product-oriented. Two unsuccessful incidents focused on the librarian's inability to get access to information that the user was seeking, as in the following example: "A lot of times we don't have what they want, like this student came in this afternoon for the census tract for, I think it was one town in near Philadelphia and one town in Maryland and we don't have it. . . . Things like that are unsuccessful, just because we didn't have what they wanted."

The third incident involving the information theme centered on lack of accuracy—the librarian's perceived failure to find the right answer—in this case, while the user was still present. Although the librarian did eventually find the answer, it was not until after the user left the library: "So I 'hopped' onto the [online] catalog, typed in the Japanese Encyclopedia and it wasn't there, and I was so unnerved by everything that was going on around me I said, 'We don't have that.' And then about twenty minutes later, and she went away, everything calmed down and I said, 'Oh this is ridiculous that I didn't try different things' and I went back on and truncated and immediately I found the Japan Encyclopedia and I was sure that was the one that she wanted." Another incident dealt with retrieval systems: "Using those three terms we got over two hundred articles on Psyclit and I explained that she needs to check our holdings to make sure that [site] has the article she wants to get it here and just to browse through and sometimes that's basically how we start off exposing them to the realm of the literature and then trying to focus in a little bit but like letting them make the choices."

Knowledge-base theme.—There were four primarily content-related successful incidents, three centering on "knowledge base," defined as the librarian's grasp of (a) subject knowledge and (b) specialized knowledge, such as understanding of the research process, of libraries, and of the user's information need. To illustrate: "And she wasn't quite sure how to access some of the secondary literature. There are a couple of bibliographies she hadn't worked with, so going from 'I need something of Alfleck's' to 'These are the bibliographies that you should be using and these are the kinds of materials that are available,' we were able to really expand on what she wanted and she walked away with much more than she had originally asked for."

Relationship-quality theme.—One of the librarians' incidents dealt with relationship quality. This theme is defined as the interpersonal dynamics of the interaction, such as perceptions of the other's communication skills and involvement in the reference process (that is, willingness to invest time). One example follows:
I think it was because it took us a while before we really got to the point of what he really needed to know and then, I think, probably above and beyond the interview was the fact that I saw a kid's light bulb go on, and he really responded and you just knew that instead of this being a drudge now was, the paper, was gonna be fun and that was great to see. . . . Finally we got to what he really needed to know and then it was like it grew and it was almost like a flower kind of.

**Users' Critical Incident Themes**
The twenty-seven users reported thirty-three critical incidents. These incidents were categorized into the same four themes as the librarians' incidents, plus one additional theme, "approachability."

**Attitude theme.**—Users reported a total of fourteen unsuccessful incidents. Twelve were classified as primarily relational. Six of these, similar to the librarians, were attributed to users' perceptions of negative librarian attitude. Users described these negative attitudes as (a) having no time, (b) unhelpful, (c) uncaring, (d) sour, (e) abrupt, and (f) impatient. As an illustration, one user stated: "Yeah well some librarians are really sour and they're like 'well why don't you do your own research?' That kind of thing." Another user commented: "And they're not very patient, they're you know 'oh well go to the computer.'"

The users also reported nineteen successful interactions, sixteen primarily relational. Thirteen of these focused on the first-ranked factor, attitude—more specifically, positive librarian attitude toward the user. Two representative excerpts follow.

It's her normal job to help you get books, interlibrary loan, but there's no reason for her to have to stay late to do it and she didn't give me a hard time about it, she was interested more in helping me than in getting home.

What stands out I guess for me is just, you know, getting involved showing that, not that you're wholly enthused, but at least that you care you're not just there and I mean there's some librarians, I guess that don't want to be librarians and . . . they're cold with you . . . but like some that I've experienced, basically, they show that they're interested to help, not just feel that they have to.

**Relationship-quality theme.**—Seven of the user's critical incidents were categorized as pertaining to relationship quality. Four of these were unsuccessful, as this example illustrates: "My first semester here, like it was my first time in the library I asked for help, she says, 'Oh are you a freshman?' like that was expected you know, that I needed her whatever, so she showed me where some things were, and then I came back and she goes, 'Well didn’t I just show you where it was?' and I was like, 'Yeah,' I said, 'but I think you just left me there, what was I supposed
to do? So I just, I think maybe that first time [was unsuccessful]. Like in a new library, [this was] very, not very nice."

Three successful incidents also dealt with the relationship quality, as this example illustrates: "I think it depends on the personality of both people, the student and the librarian because, of course, the librarian is going to be kind of snobbish or think that you didn't know what you were doing and [if] you are the type of person that reacts against that, of course you're going to have different relations, and the relations are not, the communication between the two people are not going to be as good."

In the next example the user was essentially concerned with the relationship quality as it affected the teaching/learning process: "She really took the time to show me, she went out of her way then to show me so that maybe next time I could be more independent."

*Information theme.*—Three of the user's successful incidents were primarily content related, concerned with information, as represented by this passage: "I think it was giving me the book, opening it up and telling me this is what you want, this is what you need, and to tell me exactly what kind of subject to look under and not something vague, something really specific ... and that's what made it so successful."

*Approachability theme.*—The theme of approachability emerged for users but was not present in the librarian themes. It dealt with users' perceptions of the librarian's nonverbal behaviors. Since the users were faced with the responsibility of approaching the librarian, it was reasonable that they would be concerned with these perceptions. For example, this user commented on a librarian's lack of approachability: "When they are not getting up from their desk or you know you can see that they are not happy to look for something for you really."

*Knowledge-base theme.*—Two of the users' unsuccessful incidents were classified as primarily content related, centering on perceptions that librarians lacked specialized knowledge. For example, one user observed that "if the librarian doesn't know about it, then she can't really help you with it."

**Discussion**

These results demonstrate that a communication-centered approach to the reference encounter provides rich insights into the interpersonal
dynamics between librarian and user not found in more traditional librarian performance studies. Utilizing Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson's perspective\[28\] enabled an exploration of this encounter in terms of its content and relational dimensions. The results reported here show that relational information is important in how the quality of reference interactions are perceived by users and librarians. Users reported incidents centering on relational aspects with greater frequency than did librarians. In contrast, librarians gave more weight to content dimensions in their assessment of success or failure of interactions but also perceived relationship qualities to be important.

However, librarians did attribute more unsuccessful incidents to primarily relational dimensions than to content dimensions. This finding suggests that relational aspects are important in librarian reports of negative perceptions. Librarians tended to recall unsuccessful incidents in which the users were perceived as displaying negative relational messages, such as being nasty or obnoxious, rather than those in which the information exchange was incomplete or inaccurate. Literature on the reference interaction leads one to expect that librarians would judge failure of interactions based on perceptions of unsuccessful information transfer. However, the critical incidents analyzed here provide evidence that relational factors are also important. An alternative explanation might be that librarians did not want to talk about interactions in which their reference skills were inadequate, or perhaps they did not remember these instances. Instead they remembered times when the user was at fault for being angry or uncooperative.

For both librarians and users, the number one ranked factor was primarily relational and centered on attitude. Attitude was the only factor ranked similarly by librarians and users and indicates one commonality. Librarians were especially sensitive to negative user attitude toward themselves and toward the task. Following attitude, librarians ranked primarily content factors, information and knowledge base, as second and third and relationship quality, a relational factor, as fourth. Users, in contrast, ranked relationship quality second, making their two top-ranked categories primarily relational. This finding indicates that relational aspects have overall greater importance to users.

The relational theme of approachability emerged in two of the unsuccessful incidents for users but not for librarians. Users were found to be more sensitive to librarians' nonverbal behaviors than librarians were to users' nonverbal cues. Librarians need to become more conscious of the nonverbal behaviors they exhibit and of how these behaviors may be interpreted by users as "barriers" (see also [41]). It is also desirable for librarians to become more sensitive to the nonverbal behaviors of users that may show their frustration or fears.
Implications

The application of relational communication theory is relevant and useful in understanding the librarian-user interaction. Since Dervin's [25] article on the application of communication theory to library scholarship, research efforts in this area have begun to develop. One major criticism of the library literature has been the lack of theory. This study is the first one to be published that applies the heuristically rich relational theory from the communication field to library interactions. Further, the inclusion of the user's point of view in a systematic manner adds the piece that is missing in much research in the scholarly library literature. It is highly recommended that future research involving this interaction include the user's perspective.

Current conceptions of interpersonal communication have moved away from the static, linear model held by some of the librarian informants as revealed in interview data. The linear model is usually represented as

\[ S \rightarrow M \rightarrow R, \]

in which the sender \((S)\) sends a message \((M)\) to the receiver \((R)\) with the message implicitly centered in the sender [42]. One librarian revealed this view of communication: "I am trying to communicate with the person who will ultimately have to be the recipient of the knowledge. . . . I basically target the parent in the scenario as the person who is going to be on the receiving end of the knowledge that I am hopefully to impart." Process-oriented models of communication, with meaning being centered in the receiver, are replacing these linear conceptualizations [43]. The evidence here argues for a new model of the librarian-user reference interaction. This new model recognizes the vital importance of relational messages that are communicated in the encounter along with the information transfer. John Richardson believes that it is possible to have a "complete, balanced perspective" [44, p. 85] that incorporates knowledge of reference sources, the question-negotiation process, and an understanding of the librarian-user interaction. He asserts that "perhaps only then will the field have reference librarians trained, educated, and capable of rendering high quality reference service" [44, p. 85].

Regarding practical implications, this work suggests that librarian education could benefit from increased emphasis on interpersonal dynamics, especially incorporating the user's point of view. Although many practitioners believe that "people skills" are inherent, research has shown that librarians can be educated to improve their interpersonal skills in the reference encounter [21]. A communication-centered
framework necessitates the evaluation of reference librarians in terms of interpersonal aspects as well as the ability to correctly answer the reference question.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Research

Several critical aspects of this complex interaction have been identified and explored here. However, the goal has not been to generalize these findings to all reference interactions but to gain greater insight into the reference process and to suggest additional areas of research. Grounding of future study of reference interactions in strong theoretical foundations, such as relational theory, is strongly recommended.

One possible direction for further study of librarian-user interactions is the application of Goffman's [29, 45] theory of impression management. Impression management involves a study of the ways in which people present themselves and how they protect or damage the self-esteem of others. Goffman's work on human behavior in public settings provides a powerful framework that can facilitate description and understanding of user and library behavior. Nonverbal approachability provides another area of future research since users are sensitive to the librarian's nonverbal behavior (see also [41]). Another possible avenue is to replicate this study of the reference encounter in contexts other than academic libraries.

Knowledge of the reference interaction has been extended in two important ways. First, the importance of interpersonal dimensions of this interaction, such as attitude, relationship quality, and approachability, has been documented. Second, relational as well as content dimensions critical to perceptions of success and failure in the reference encounter have been identified. This study is a significant step in exploring the dynamics of this complex encounter. With increased understanding of the process, greater success and satisfaction for both users and librarians is possible in the face of this challenging information age.

Appendix A

Representative Examples of Content-Oriented Statements

Librarians about Users

"He goes, 'Yeah I'm going to use Applied Science and Technology.'"
"This student came in this afternoon for the census tract."
"So I said, well I didn't know, but I would look it up."
Users about Librarians
"To tell me exactly what kind of subjects to look under."
"Directed me to the law books."
"I was looking, trying to get specific information."

Appendix B
Representational Examples of Relational-Oriented Statements

Librarians about Users
"He was angry; he was angry when he started."
"A lot of it was his attitude."
"She kept interrupting each time."
"It was also exciting because she was very excited about the whole thing."

Users about Librarians
"She was very nice and helpful and pleasant. . . . She felt comfortable."
"She went out of her way."
"She treated me like she wanted to be treated herself, you know with respect."

REFERENCES


Radford, Gary P. "Positivism, Foucault, and the Fantasia of the Library: Conceptions