



Evidence Summary

Gender, Race, and Age of Librarians and Users Have an Impact on the Perceived Approachability of Librarians

A Review of:

Bonnet, J. L., & McAlexander, B. (2012). Structural diversity in academic libraries: A study of librarian approachability. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 38(5), 277-286.
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Abstract

Objective – To assess how the age, gender, and race characteristics of library users affect their perceptions of the approachability of reference librarians with similar or different demographic characteristics.

Design – Image rating survey.

Setting – Large, three-campus university system in the United States.

Subjects – There were 449 students, staff, and faculty of different ages, gender, and race.

Methods – In an online survey respondents were presented with images of hypothetical

librarians and asked to evaluate their approachability, using a scale from 1 to 10. The images showed librarians with neutral emotional expressions against a standardized, neutral background. The librarians' age, gender, and race were systematically varied. Only White, African American, and Asian American librarians were shown. Afterwards respondents were asked to identify their own age, gender, race, and status.

Main Results – Respondents perceived female librarians as more approachable than male librarians, maybe due to expectations caused by the female librarian stereotype. They found librarians of their own age group more approachable. African American respondents scored African American librarians as more

approachable, whereas Whites expressed no significant variation when rating the approachability of librarians of different races. Thus, African Americans demonstrated strong in-group bias but Whites manifested colour blindness – possibly a strategy to avoid the appearance of racial bias. Asian Americans rated African American librarians lower than White librarians.

Conclusion – This study demonstrates that visible demographic characteristics matter in people’s first impressions of librarians. Findings confirm that diversity initiatives are needed in academic libraries to ensure that all users feel welcome and are encouraged to approach librarians. Regarding gender, programs that deflate the female librarian stereotype may help improve the approachability image of male librarians. Academic libraries should staff the reference desk with individuals covering a wide range of ages, including college-aged interns, whom traditional age students find most approachable. Libraries should also build a racially diverse staff to meet the needs of a racially diverse user population. Since first impressions have lasting effects on the development of social relationships, structural diversity should be a priority for libraries’ diversity programs.

Commentary

Whereas most library diversity studies focus on librarians or users separately, this project provides a compelling analysis of their interactions, especially the impact of their respective demographic characteristics on librarians’ perceived approachability. It relies on recent psychological models for stereotypical impressions. An extensive bibliography gives the study a strong theoretical and methodological foundation.

The survey methodology and statistical analysis are solid, and the instrument was validated by pilot tests (Glynn, 2006, p.393). For more nuanced results, additional ethno-racial categories could have been included: respondents were categorized as White

(around 60%), African American (only 6%), and Asian American (18%), with the remainder being lumped under “other.” For this reason it would have been useful to include an appendix with the demographic and personality questions that were asked in the survey and detailed information about the respondents’ demographic profiles. The authors acknowledge that they could not include Hispanic librarians, because they could not find enough librarian images that would match the purpose of the study.

Some of the interpretations rely on appealing but untested hypotheses, such as the positive impact of the female librarian stereotype on women’s approachability or White respondents’ strategic colour blindness when evaluating Black librarians. The authors confirm the need for diversity in library staff. Their findings lend credence to the proposal to place student workers at the reference desk. However their conclusions overestimate the external validity of the study (Glynn, 2006, p. 398). The survey was administered at a Midwestern university, where the ethno-racial makeup and culture are somewhat different from other regions, but the authors offer seemingly uniform, nationwide recommendations about the need for diversity programs. Regarding gender, they rightly recognize that stereotypes can vary as they are influenced by factors like “societal norms, cultural factors and context” (p. 283). Yet they do not consider that race and ethnicity are also social constructions that are context-dependent. Curiously, their finding that female librarians are seen as more approachable leads them to conclude that more male librarians are needed, but the finding that young or Black librarians are preferred by young or Black users prompts them to call for an increased number of young persons and African Americans on the reference desk. It looks like the authors determined some of their conclusions before starting their study.

Finally, reliance on a neutral, hypothetical situation is sound practice but it would be useful to test librarian approachability in real-life or naturalistic settings, where the impact of

demographic factors relative to affective and situational factors could be evaluated. Since this 2012 article, the authors have published a new study testing the influence of affect and clothing on approachability and recommend research into combinations of variables that should lead to valuable insight for library services (Bonnet & McAlexander 2013, p. 10).

References

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- Glynn, L. (2006). A critical appraisal tool for library and information research. *Library Hi Tech*, 24(3), 387-399. doi:10.1108/07378830610692154