

INTERACTING FOR INFORMATION: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF REFERENCE

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As the public face of the archives the reference archivist needs to provide satisfaction for clients. But through interacting, he/she can suffer stress, especially from the pressures of on-demand service and user expectations. Ways of improving communicating for information, which would reduce the stress and increase satisfaction for both researcher and archivist, are suggested

The reference archivist is the public face of the archives. He/she has the dual responsibility of providing access to researchers, whilst protecting unique records. The reference archivist's task is to bring people and information (records) together, through communication. Reference can be a rewarding place to work. Yet, as a "helping" industry, it has its share of stresses. If communication is poor, satisfaction is low¹ between archivist and client.

The two major sources of stress from the communication of researcher and archivist are the on-demand situation, and user expectations. It is not intended to approach these stressors as though they are unparalleled in other service professions, although they do have a certain archival "flavour" of their own. After studying the psychology of these interactions, proposals are made as to how reference archivists can strive for achievement and user satisfaction, but not at their health's expense.

As a registered nurse I have been interested in the psychology of interaction, and have attempted here to extrapolate some of the human relations views of nursing to another service profession—archives reference. As a human being I have some experience in social psychology. Not the scientific study of social psychology—the theories and research of how

thoughts, feelings and intentions are influenced by the actual or implied presence of others.² My experience is in interacting with people in the work and everyday environment. I know that there are some guidelines that are essential for effective interaction within situations. For example—I may gaze deeply into the eyes of my lover, but give short, disinterested glances to a shop assistant.³ I know that to reverse these procedures puts the interaction in danger of breaking the rules.

Communication is an innate behaviour, but it is also a skill that can be honed. Duckett says:

“The days of the curator as the scholarly hermit are gone. He must have technical skills but also be able to deal with people.”⁴

We learn the theoretical and practical skills of the archival world—arrangement and description, accessioning, conservation, and so on. But should we not also acquire the skills to accomplish the other aspect of the archival world—access and use? We learn about user pays, marketing strategies, etcetera, and ways information can be made available. Can we not also learn to make the information available with less stress to the archivist and more satisfaction to the user? The reference process is first and foremost social interaction, which requires certain skills.

“To engage in social interaction a person must be able to accurately perceive, interpret and predict other people’s behaviour and be good at communicating our thoughts, feelings and intentions to others.”⁵

We can learn to “accurately perceive, interpret and predict”, and “be good at communication”. But first we need to become aware of the ways reference communication can cause problems.

The on-demand and user expectations aspects form the core to the stresses of communication. When communication breaks down and satisfaction is low, the demands of interacting present themselves as stress. Stress is

“the non specific response of the body to hostile conditions in the immediate environment—be it psychological or physiological.”⁶

Stress manifests itself in any number of ways. For example, tiredness, ulcers, alcoholism, weight loss, insomnia, irritability and headaches, depending upon whether it is short-term and limited, or chronic.

Through observing the reference desk at a major archives office and informally interviewing some employees, I have drawn inferences of some sources of stress. They are: frustration and repetition, fear, and inability to negotiate with the client. It is not intended to suggest that other factors such as environment do not affect one’s stress level. But social psychology looks at interacting behaviour. How do the above conditions affect on-demand services and user expectations within the archival reference context?

While in a library it is possible for one to find information without communicating with anyone, archives require each client to be vetted to gain access to records. The interaction is thus more intensive. Mediation between the user and materials by the archivist is necessary because of the dynamic nature of inquiry, making access without archival interaction far more complex than finding a particular book in a library.⁷

Ideally the same quality of service is required to be given to all, to provide them with satisfaction. This service can sometimes require long and detailed attention. Repeating the same process, the same words, over and over to each client can be frustrating.

Clients expect the archivist, given very little information, to be able to produce the goods. Or alternatively, while eight people line up behind them, a client will tell the story of what they've found in their family tree. Some researchers expect to be spoon fed: they are happy to let the staff lead them through the processes in the archives necessary to find information. Others will not admit their ignorance of archives. Archivaphobia, a morbid fear of archives, is marked by outbursts of bellicose hostility towards the archivist, often leaving the archivist in a state of depression.⁸

One cannot, in providing a service, retaliate to such comments as "you silly little man" although it may not only be pertinent to reply to such demeaning words, it may also be necessary to relieve the stress. Instead, it creates more frustration.

Archives are not self-serve. And yet, archivists are not formally trained to provide reference services. The training that exists emphasis rules and procedures rather than how to listen, ask questions, or teach researchers to make best use of the repository.⁹ Little has been written on archival reference services or on methods of teaching reference skills. Dowler believes archivists need to change administrative priorities. They need to look systematically at the operation of archival repositories and give higher priority to the use of archives. If use is the measure and justification of archives, then reference should be first, not last, in operational priorities.¹⁰

Clients, whether they are intelligent, ignorant, verbose, brief, boisterous or silent must pass through the archivist, who serves as the public relations person of the archives. As the front line in a service industry, quality of service is important, although such encounters are mentally and physically tiring.

We all fear failure. In reference there is the fear of the inability to carry out the service to the client's expectations. Clients have assumptions about what they will get from the archives. Often it is because they are misinformed. Or because they have been misguided by the archivist. Or because they expect too much from the archivist. Dissatisfaction can

produce some unpleasant side effects in people. The new archivist who is unfamiliar with the collections may guide a researcher to a particular source, when later the researcher finds a better one that could have saved much time and effort. The archivist gets the blame.

Similarly, the archivist is often seen as an obstacle to the researcher rather than as a defender of the archives. The client who won't believe a record can't be produced because of its fragility or access restriction can be difficult to handle. His/her frustration impacts on the archivist whose job is to provide satisfaction and who has therefore failed.

Added to this is fear of failing in front of archival colleagues, and repercussions from top management. Negative feedback can be healthy and helpful, but unless weighed up with positive feedback, can be most stressful. We all like to know "am I doing OK?" "Am I a good service person?" "Am I providing satisfaction?"

The user expects the archivist to know what he/she is talking about. Reference services require an archivist to understand the requests of many people in one day. Inability to negotiate is a major stimulus to stress.

"Librarians (and archivists) are not always aware of what the user is trying to communicate".¹¹ Often this is because the information need is ill-defined in the mind of the user. Negotiation is not a simple interaction. It requires sufficient communication to accomplish the purpose. Others may be queued behind, and may be kept waiting. Communication requires perception and evaluation of the information perceived.¹² Even a client with a definite idea of what their question is can be frustrated by the other factors that limit an archives' ability to provide complete access to its materials. The principles of provenance and original order require archivists to become translators between the subject-oriented questions that researchers pose and the creator-based records they administer.¹³

Clients do not relate well to negative vibrations from the archivist, and vice versa. Dissatisfied clients generally let the archivist know, because the client cannot avoid dealing with the archivist.

The archivist may convey the wrong attitude—it's not what is said but how. He/she may have problems of his/her own and may not feel like talking to anyone. He/she might be fatigued after a long day, or even be fed up with the job. The archivist may lack the everyday social skills of communication, or simply be unable to relate on a constant level. Some people can't identify the right situations for certain behaviour.¹⁴

Good reference archivists, according to Kepley, are constantly hammered with questions and asked to drop one task to respond to the next inquiry. They must subsume their own egos, opinions and interests to concentrate on what their patrons think is important. Their workflow is unpredictable, and they can lose a sense of control over their time

and themselves. This can be demoralising and exhausting.¹⁵ The stresses of providing on-demand services and those brought about by unrealistic user expectations in the communication of information can have an adverse effect on the archivist—burnout. The signs of burnout include irritability with users' questions, a loss of patience and a decreased desire to respond conscientiously to their questions.¹⁶ What is best for the client is not always best for the archivist. A burnt-out archivist can no longer provide good service.

So, what can we do now that we are aware of some of the stresses of the reference archivist's job? Could we interact better? Could we teach a profession and a service? Should we re-evaluate traditional practices and look at archivists not archives? What makes a good archivist in the reference field?

Let us start with the archivist him/herself. Jenkinson, in 1947, asked what qualifications, besides intelligence and good nature must we require of the archivist in the search room.

"Indexing, Listing and Editing are not the sole facilities which will be required of him. He will find . . . that he is expected to act as a general guide and adviser; that all the really knotty problems will be submitted to him . . ."¹⁷

Jenkinson says we require in the archivist "Omniscience".

An archivist, according to Philip D. Jordan, is a trained person who assists a researcher to swim in a bottomless sea of endlessly fascinating records.¹⁸ Similarly Brooks says that success in consulting primary sources depends upon co-operation of the archivist and the researcher. Co-operation, assistance, adviser, good nature and guide—are not these the hallmarks of a good communicator, and service giver? The archivist, far from being someone who can avoid human contact, is essentially a negotiator and mediator.¹⁹

In practice, these service skills are desired and appreciated. A kindly historian expressing his appreciation of the work by staff members remarked "they were more than archivists or librarians—they were genuinely helpful".²⁰ The Society of American Archivists *Newsletter* asked a number of administrators in archival institutions to indicate which attributes from the *Times* list they felt were important in ideal archives applicants. The two highest scores were "good writing and speaking skills" 67%, and "ability to get along with people" 61%.²¹

If good communication skills are a desirable trait in the archivist, perhaps we should look at developing these skills, through professional education. Traditional archival practice looks at the archives, not the archivist. Should we not be addressing the human contact side of our profession? Are we trying too hard to be professional?

University education emphasises mastering a body of theoretical know-

ledge. Practical experience is limited. Our image of ourselves is that we are professionals, imbued with the essential knowledge and skill even before we reach the work environment. Many new archives graduates have never worked before, or had to deal with the “general public”. Recruitment for the archives course emphasises the intellectual need for the job. Does recruitment literature accurately convey the stressful nature of the work? Are we made aware we need communication skills to work in a public service position? More emphasis needs to be placed on understanding and developing human relations concepts and skills.

In America, participants in a discussion on the relationship between archival training and archival work expressed a belief that a clear definition of archival work would help educators to devise compatible programs.²² Freeman asked what would happen if we were to change our focus from the administration of the records to the requirements of the users. She proposes, among other suggestions, sessions on the reference process which:

“would be based on observation and analysis of successful and unsuccessful reference interviews and would emphasise techniques for gathering information, asking and hearing questions, and developing sound research strategies with the client. The trainee would move through a series of increasingly sophisticated reference negotiations”.²³

If, as Freeman suggests, we can learn to interact better and thus, as a better service provider, reduce the stresses, how do we go about it?

First, we need the ability to read our own thoughts and feelings. If aware of the characteristics that make us different from others—our perceptions, feelings and communication patterns, we can understand the strengths and weaknesses that can facilitate or hinder communication with others.²⁴ We can then look beyond our own views to see how others see things and treat them accordingly. For example—we may feel that genealogy is frivolous, yet the researcher studying it may think it the most important thing in his/her life.

The self is not spontaneously discovered. It is slowly revealed.²⁵ It is helpful if we can observe our own behaviour and see how it appears to others. Through videotapes and interaction for example, we can develop feedback regarding verbal and non-verbal messages. It can be somewhat of a surprise to see our shortcomings on film. To become less sensitive about the process we need thorough exposure to feel comfortable with it. Self-awareness is also essential for stress management, which will be discussed later. Understanding our own feelings means having the potential to deal with them.

Social psychologists express the need for those in “helping” professions also to learn interactive skills such as listening, speaking, communicating and perceiving emotions and using and perceiving non-verbal signals such

as eye contact, body language and use of space.²⁶ There are multifarious methods of how skills are taught, as in any education process.

For example—modelling and imitation means the trainer presents the behaviours to be learned to the trainee. He/she is then requested to role-play the performance.²⁷ Perhaps John Cleese could be encouraged to present “How to best approach the researcher”. As Freeman also suggests unsuccessful techniques, the flip-side could be “How to best not approach the researcher”. Another method, social reinforcement in the form of praise and social pressure, may also be used to shape behaviour.²⁸

Even such a basic skill as listening may require careful training. Miller, Berg and Archer found there are large differences between people in how well they can listen, and help others to “open-up”. For example they use an Opener Scale in which items fall into three categories: (a) perceived reactions to others (eg, “people feel relaxed around me”); (b) interest in listening to others (eg, “I enjoy listening to people”); (c) interpersonal skill (eg, “I can keep people talking about themselves”).²⁹ The implication of these studies is that by learning to reinforce the speaker, asking the right questions and using the right amount of eye contact, “skilled listening” can be taught.

Hatchard and Toy found that most clients have a generalised fear of asking questions in a strange environment.³⁰ Archives can be an intimidating environment. And Taylor suggests that the researcher can’t always describe or even know his need correctly.³¹ Hence it would appear that the archives has a great need for people experienced in question-negotiation, if satisfaction is to be provided. Here again, a number of settings can be established for role-play with videotaping to facilitate analysis and feed-back.

As a young student nurse in human relations lessons I remember the importance of learning negotiation techniques. If a patient stated “I think I’m going to die”, what would you respond? Obviously he/she is trying to tell you something, to pass on or obtain information, as a researcher does in a reference inquiry. This particular comment by the patient requires more than a learned social response like “don’t worry, everything will be OK”. It requires reflection—directing back to the patient his/her ideas, feelings, questions or content. Reflection also attempts to help the patient recognise ideas and feeling as part of his/her self-system.³² Although this example is not a standard one an archivist would encounter, the communication technique is the same.

Seeking clarification is another negotiation technique used in an attempt to understand the message of the sender through feedback. “I’m not sure I understand” or “Can you go over that again” tells the client you are listening, but need help understanding.³³

Asking questions in context—discovering the situation out of which

an inquiry comes can be found by open and neutral questioning.³⁴ An open question allows the user to respond in his/her own terms, a closed question limits responses to one of several options—yes or no, or A or B or C.³⁵ The respondent can choose from the answers provided, but not others. The closed sequence is most useful for handling the researcher who wants to tell his/her life story at the reference desk.

These methods may all sound a little theatrical, like some program from the drama school. And yet we are not, as archivists in the reference area, playing a part? If we can learn how best to tackle the part, and have the necessary props (in the form of skills) to support our task, aren't we putting on a better show? Our performance after all, is how the archives are judged. We are the public face. We are the front line in a service industry.

Finally, along with self-awareness, and communication skills, we need stress management to combat the stresses that will always occur in a service industry. We can learn to strive for achievement, but not at the price of our health. Any situation can produce stress, and the individual must have the ability to cope with it. It is for this reason that I advocate archivists should be made aware of the personal requirements and stress of archives reference work beforehand. Forewarned is forearmed.

Relaxation and meditation are suitable stress releasers for everyone. Students in the archives course could certainly benefit from such treatment. There are many other methods of stress management—stress management classes, psychological strategies, social support groups are just a few.

On the other hand, work is not everything in life. One's outside life should be made as pleasant as possible. Physical outlets are important. People dealing with aggressive or demanding clients are beset by significant muscle stress.³⁶ There should be a balance between work and play. One of the characteristics of burnout is that it is suffered only at work. For this reason amicable relations outside the work environment with co-workers are beneficial. The archivists at the Archives Office of New South Wales combine both work and play by spending lunchtimes playing volleyball and participating in aerobics.

Conclusion

To be able to identify stress in ourselves we need to be self aware, aware of what causes stress and what can be done to alleviate it. We need to provide satisfaction in our work, but we need also to be satisfied.

We have a duty to the archives but also to the public. No matter what archival skills we have, the public will always be there. How we see and deal with them depends on ourselves. If we can communicate better with them, then information, the reason for the service, will be more smoothly passed on.

Reference should be the first priority of archives if use is its purpose. We need to learn reference skills—how to listen, ask questions, and teach researchers how to best use the archives. We need to learn to understand our own thoughts and feelings and then be able to deal with them, in order to then learn interactive skills. And we need to cope with the stresses of a service industry, so that we can achieve our best. I believe archives training should include not only intellectual skills, but also human relations concepts and skills.

I have not attempted to design a formula for successful researcher/archivist relationships. Communication is not a static thing that can be guided by learning one system. But the utilisation of the general ideas can develop the ability to provide successful interacting skills and anticipate problems, such as stress, before they arise. We can learn not only “Keeping Archives” but “Keeping Sane”.

FOOTNOTES

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