Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Curry's Study on the Quality of Public Library Reference Service to LGBTQ Youth

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Volume 13, Number 1, 2018

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1102617ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip29399

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Publisher(s)

University of Alberta Library

ISSN

1715-720X (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Stevens, G. (2018). Review of [Curry's Study on the Quality of Public Library Reference Service to LGBTQ Youth / Curry, A. (2005). If I ask, will they answer? Evaluating public library reference service to gay and lesbian youth. Reference & User Services Quarterly, 45(1), 65-75. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/journal/refuseserq]. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, *13*(1), 57–63. https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip29399

Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Classics

Curry's Study on the Quality of Public Library Reference Service to LGBTQ Youth

A Review of:
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Received: 9 Jan. 2018 **Accepted:** 30 Jan. 2018

DOI: 10.18438/eblip29399

Abstract

Objective - To assess the quality of service provided by reference staff in public libraries when presented with a request for LGBTQ information by a young person.

Design - Unobtrusive observation without informed consent.

Setting - Public library branches in the greater Vancouver area, British Columbia, Canada.

Subjects – Reference librarians.

Methods - A 19-year-old posing as a high school student approached reference desk staff at 20 public library branches. The student proxy, "Angela", was instructed to ask for books on forming a gay-straight alliance at her school and, if there was a full reference interview, to

also ask for recommendations of novels that the group might read. She recorded the reactions, both verbal and nonverbal, using Reference and User Services Association guidelines as a template. Library administrators were aware of the potential visits and permitted the research, but the reference desk staff were not aware of a potential visit by the student proxy. The researcher claimed that her method, while deceptive, was necessary to obtain authentic reactions from the library staff.

Main Results - Most reference librarians approached by Angela made adequate attempts to assist her, although a few library staff reacted negatively to her query. Half of the librarians reacted positively to the patron's request, with most of the others providing neutral responses. Very few of the librarians actually taught the patron how to use the library's catalog to search for materials, and most of the librarians were unable to find appropriate materials due to not knowing the appropriate search terms. Only three library staff showed overt disapproval of the search topic, such as frowning or rushing to finish the reference interview quickly, with most remaining objective or supportive. Because of the service she received, Angela stated that eight of the 20 libraries were welcoming enough that she thought she would return.

Conclusion - The wide range of responses received by Angela indicated that there was room for improvement in educating public library staff on gay and lesbian issues and materials, especially for gay and lesbian youth.

Commentary

Library services for members of the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community have not been studied extensively in the library literature. Many of the existing research studies on libraries and LGBTQ patrons have been written from the academic library perspective. Studies on LGBTQ information seeking behavior, the composition of collections, and the discoverability of LGBTQ materials through appropriate subject headings are common themes in the existing body of literature for all types of libraries. However, there have been fewer studies on LGBTQ patrons and public services such as reference. In this context, Curry's study was significant for several reasons. Her study was one of a very small number of research studies on providing reference services to the LGBTQ community within a public library. It was the first study to consider public library reference services exclusive of other library services and collections. Perhaps most significantly, her study was focused on gay and lesbian youth, a group whose experiences in public libraries had not been studied previously.

Background

A few research studies in the 1990s focused on how well LGBTQ patron needs were being met through public library collections and services. Creelman and Harris (1990) and Whitt (1993) both studied the information needs of lesbian patrons. Creelman and Harris focused on how well public library collections met the information needs of a small cohort of women during the coming out process, but there was no mention in their findings of the women using the services of library reference staff to find information (Creelman & Harris, 1990). In her larger study of lesbian information needs, Whitt mentioned that the women in her survey were generally dissatisfied with the services in their public libraries. A variety of factors played into their responses, such as embarrassment or fear for one's safety in a small community, to a perceived lack of training for library staff on gay and lesbian needs and issues (Whitt, 1993). Joyce and Schrader (1997) studied the satisfaction of gay men with their public library, and the men generally were satisfied with the services they received when seeking gay-related information. Between these studies, it is difficult to come to any conclusions about the quality of public services in the 1990s. However, none of these earlier studies were dedicated specifically to the quality of public services offered by library staff.

Instead, the focus of all three was the quality of the collections available to the patrons and how well these materials met the information needs of the survey respondents.

None of these studies from the 1990s specifically addressed the needs of LGBTQ youth. LGBTQ youth are arguably the subgroup in greatest need for accurate information on LGBTQ issues, especially during the coming out process (Mehra & Braquet, 2007). Libraries are a reliable source of information on sexuality and can provide a supportive environment for young people (Siegel, 2007). All of the studies discussed above did include younger people, but the age ranges were varied. The men in the Joyce and Schrader (1997) study were generally young, with a mean age of 20, but their ages ranged from teens to late 40s; for that reason it cannot truly be considered a youth study. Furthermore, it cannot be considered a full representation of the LGBTQ community because all of the respondents were gay men. Similarly, the lesbians in the Creelman and Harris (1990) and Whitt (1993) studies also represented a range of ages with a mean of about 29 and 34 years old respectively, so they are of limited use when considering the needs and views of LGBTQ youth.

The Curry Study

The three studies mentioned above from the 1990s all used surveys in order to determine the satisfaction of gay and lesbian patrons in public libraries. While surveys can provide insight into how information needs are being met, they are also based on the retrospective perceptions of library users. They do not necessarily provide an objective picture of the overall quality of public services being offered to patrons.

In order to determine the quality of services that a young LGBTQ person might receive at a public library reference desk, Curry designed an unusual study. She employed a university student to pose as a 15-year-old high school student. This student was to approach the reference desk in branches of the Vancouver public library system and ask for books on starting a gay-straight alliance at her high school, as well as some suggestions of novels for the group to read. The student proxy, given the pseudonym Angela, would record the responses she received to her query, both the librarian's actions as well as the books and resources recommended, immediately after the reference interview. Curry referred to this method as "unobtrusive observation without informed consent" (Curry, 2005, p. 67). The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) Guidelines were used as the template for evaluating the quality of the individual reference interviews, including assessment of objectivity, verbal and nonverbal communication, and the parts of a reference interview.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Curry's university (University of British Columbia) scrutinized her study because the project involved intentional deception of the library staff. However, Curry maintained that deception was crucial to obtaining authentic responses by the library staff. Other potential methods of studying how library staff would react, such as self-reported surveys or mock reference interviews with informed consent, would lead to more guarded responses. Therefore, she argued that the potential benefit was greater than any harm that might be suffered by staff members who were deceived. As a compromise, the chief librarians of all 11 library systems in the service area were consulted regarding the project and their concerns were assuaged by the researcher. All of the administrators decided not to inform the reference desk staff in their respective libraries, so the staff were not aware that the interaction might take place.

Angela visited 20 library branches, representing all the area library systems. She was instructed to visit the reference desk for young adult materials, which was generally the adult reference desk. She recorded the physical and verbal manners the library staff person used when greeting her, as well as the reactions when

she asked for books that could help her in starting a gay-straight alliance club. The library staff reactions ranged widely, with half receiving positive scores from Angela on their general attitude toward her request. Only 3 of the 20 responded negatively to her request for help. Angela described negative non-verbal cues such as raised eyebrows, frowns, and lip-biting, as well as remarks such as referring to gay and lesbian fiction as "weird fiction" and a perceived desire to finish the reference interview as soon as possible (Curry, 2005, p. 70).

Despite offering pleasant greetings and body language, many of the library staff were unable to provide responses to Angela's request that Curry deemed acceptable. Most of the librarians had difficulty formulating the correct keywords for a catalog search, with three-fourths of them only using the word *gay* as a search term. Even more disappointing for Curry was the lack of instruction provided to Angela by the library staff: only 3 out of 20 showed Angela how to use the library's online resources, and one of the other 17 just told her to "look it up on the computer" herself despite Angela claiming ignorance on how to use the catalog (Curry, 2005, p. 71). One staff person was reported to have started a reference interview and then disappeared, leaving Angela abandoned at the desk. Despite a mixed range of attitudes and reference interview results, Angela stated that she would have returned to 8 of the 20 again. The ignorance, indifference, and, in three cases, negativity, she received from staff would have deterred her from returning to the majority of the reference desks she visited.

Curry concluded that there was "room for improvement" in most of the reference interviews (p. 73). She speculated on how actual LGBTQ teens would have reacted to one of the poorer reference interviews. She also recommended that awareness of LGBTQ issues and materials, especially for younger patrons, be added to library school curricula.

Subsequent Research

It has been more than a decade since Curry conducted her study. During that time many significant changes have occurred, both in librarianship and in the LGBTQ community. While there remain challenges in attaining full equality for the LGBTQ community, there has been an overall increase in acceptance of gay and lesbian people in the United States over the past few decades (Keleher & Smith, 2012). In 2005, the year Curry's study was published, the Civil Marriage Act became law in Canada, allowing same-sex couples to marry. Ten years later, the US Supreme Court ruling in Obergefell v. Hodges guaranteed the same right to marry in all states. Increasing numbers of celebrities and other notables are coming out, often to less fanfare than before. Despite these improvements, there are still challenges for the LGBTQ community, some of which adversely affect younger LGBTQ people. LGBTQ teens remain at a greater risk for suicide than other teens (Caputi, Smith, & Ayers, 2017). Another great challenge for younger people is that there are no explicit protections in 34 states to protect LGBTQ students in elementary and high schools (Human Rights Campaign, 2017). Because of this, LGBTQ youth still may fear coming out because of the potential for unchecked bullying and discrimination. Both of these factors also illustrate why LGBTQ teens need reliable information and that a public library, unlike a school library, may be a safer place for a teenager to search for LGBTQ materials.

Just as there have been societal changes over the past 15 years that impact the LGBTQ community, there have also been significant changes in librarianship. Public library websites have become more robust since 2005, allowing patrons to access databases and e-resources remotely. A library patron worried about judgement or embarrassment could conceivably locate a book in the library's catalog, request it to be held for them, and then use self-checkout, circumventing any awkward interactions with library staff and ensuring their privacy.

Alternatively, the patron could also choose from an increasing number of e-books, which could be virtually checked out and downloaded without a visit to the local library.

Virtual reference services are also more prevalent, which could potentially allow a young LGBTQ person to ask questions of the reference staff through online chat instead of asking face-to-face. However, there has not been any definitive research regarding online reference services and LGBTQ patrons of any age. Matteson, Salamon, and Brewster (2011) conducted a systematic review on synchronous chat services, but could not draw any certain conclusions regarding patron preferences and satisfaction. Morris and Roberto (2016) discovered in their study of LGBTQ healthcare professionals' information seeking that there is not necessarily a preference for virtual services over in-person reference. In that study, they determined that it was more important to the healthcare professionals to find librarians who were either LGBTQ themselves or at least knowledgeable on LGBTQ issues and needs (Morris & Roberto, 2016). While the use of virtual reference may be a solution for any fear or embarrassment in asking sensitive questions, further research may be needed to determine if LGBTQ youth would actually embrace this technology.

All of this leads to the ultimate question: have public services in libraries improved since Curry's study?

Despite Curry's call for greater awareness of LGBTQ issues and materials through increased training, both in LIS education and in the workplace, a significant change in LGBTQ awareness in public libraries is not apparent. In their survey on LGBTQ materials and services in public libraries, Hart and Mfazo (2010) found that less than one-third (29.4%) of respondents to their survey of library staff indicated that they had received an LGBTQ-related question within the past year. It is unclear why so few questions were presented, but it can be speculated that many LGBTQ patrons do not feel comfortable asking such questions in the public library.

Most "LGBTQ" library studies are actually discussing the two most visible groups under the LGBTQ umbrella: gay men and lesbians. In 2017, Drake and Bielefield (2017) conducted a significant survey on transgender usage of library collections and services. They noted that most respondents to their survey did not use reference services for fear of discrimination, often based on past experiences, or for the library staff's lack of knowledge on transgender issues and resources (Drake & Bielefield, 2017). This study is also notable because of the ages of the respondents. While it is not specifically a study of transgender youth, nearly half (42%) of the participants were under 25 (Drake & Bielefield, 2017). This study can be viewed as continuing Curry's work; however, it is disappointing to think that there remains a great need for both diversity training for staff and outreach for LGBTQ patrons.

All of these more recent studies point to a continuing need for libraries to be more proactive in addressing the needs of LGBTQ youth. Mehra and Braquet (2007) presented this need as an opportunity for libraries to assist young people during their coming out, through services such as referrals to community resources and better LGBTQ collections. LGBTQ youth want librarians they can trust, and who will work with them to develop relationships (Hawkins, Morris, Nguyen, Siegel, & Vardell, 2017). If a reference librarian can work on establishing that relationship with a younger LGBTQ patron, then that relationship would be meaningful for both parties, ultimately helping the young person beyond the basic reference transaction.

Curry's study remains a crucial work. It is one of a handful of research articles on reference services to LGBTQ patrons in the last two decades, and practically the only study to focus exclusively on LGBTQ youth in public libraries. As nearly every other available research study

on services to LGBTQ patrons in libraries has been a survey, Curry's method of using unobtrusive observation with a proxy teen is unique. It provided an honest snapshot of how a teen would be treated at the reference desk in a given situation. The lack of newer research in this area is an opportunity to determine if libraries are providing better public services to LGBTQ youth. Until newer research occurs, the Curry study will remain the cornerstone study on LGBTQ youth in public libraries.

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