

Conversation Starter

Saturday, June 28 at 10:30am

You Have My Empathy: What Does Empathy Look Like in the Library?

Presentation Notes:

Overview of Presentation

- TA DA!

Why Do I Care?

- Initially, Pastoral Care
 - Towards the end of my first year of the doc program, my advisor sent me an article by Shaper and Streatfield called “Invisible Care?”. Pastoral care is enriched in the UK and Australian educational systems. By pastoral care, the authors referred to the social, emotional, and psychological support school librarians provide students.
 - But the word “pastoral” has specific connotations for Americans, mainly religious. Something that never occurred to me while incorporating pastoral care in my research. Required a lot of reflection and reading, which led to my discovery of a few researchers in the UK who have looked into empathy and public librarianship.
- Personal experience
 - Worked in a rural public library.
- Talked about in LIS but vaguely
 - There is a lack of scholarly research into empathy and libraries, and the social, emotional, psychological support librarians and library staff provide patrons
 - The majority of limited research into empathy has focused on public libraries
 - Perhaps empathy is difficult to talk about because, ‘Certain experiences cannot be meaningfully expressed by numbers’. For example, in a circ report. Where does empathy fit in?

Defining Empathy: What Do We Mean By “Empathy”?

- “Empathy allows two individuals to understand each other and share prevailing human occurrences”(joy, sadness) (Angell, 2011). It allows an individual to identify with and comprehend the experiences and feelings of another, which is an important requirement for our profession. Empathy is critical in helping librarians and library staff become more sensitive to user needs
- Many, many names
 - Such as library as a safe space, supporting social and emotional development, affective dimensions of service (researcher at Rutgers), general support, emotional labor (from the business lit)
- Empathy is not a one way process- patrons will also empathize with librarians and gaining a better grasp of potential limitations facing librarians. There is understanding on both ends of the interaction.

What Does Empathy Look Like?

- An invisible service
 - “Activities that increase self-awareness, active listening, respect, and tolerance for differences can facilitate the occurrence of empathy” (Angell, 2011)
 - It isn’t necessarily specific, identifying “empathetic activities”. Empathy underskirts the services we offer patrons from outreach to collection development to reference.
 - Research has suggested that librarians aren’t always aware that they are playing an empathic role with patrons.
 - This past May I interviewed school and public librarians for my dissertation. I asked about this more affective side to their work. They mentioned several services they provide students like developing the library as a safe haven. Creating this space through comfortable furniture, bright painted walls, games, etc. Actually sitting down with students and doing one on one computer training, Readers Advisory). But they didn’t identify these as social, empathetic services. It was just what they did.
 - But these more personalized services should be communicated with community and used to promote the value of library services (like funding and advocacy). Empathy has the potential to enhance library service – assess collection, evaluate equitable services.
- Remember MLIS coursework?
 - Applying empathy to LIS isn’t anything new
 - Elements of empathy can be seen in the work of established LIS researchers.
 - The Reference Interview
 - Similar to therapy – not a one-way process. As a librarian, you are deciphering of what the user is asking. Identifying potentially anxious patrons, similar to visitors to a foreign county, unfamiliar to local customs and dialects
 - Kuhltau’s Information Search Process (ISP)
 - Six stage model of a user’s experience in the process of information seeking
 - Included affective (feelings) along with cognitive (thoughts) and physical (actions) at each stage. Key to ISP is the principle of uncertainty which occurs
 - Taylor’s question negotiation
 - Taylor criticized the pragmatic focus of library education and research. He developed a theoretical model based on the reference interview. For him, the perspective of patron should be included. To help a patron, the librarian must be aware of the motivation, objective, and personal background.

Research Background of Empathy

- Maxfield (1954)
 - University of Illinois at Chicago’s Library Program
 - Revolutionary idea of getting rid of reference department (1951); wanted to improve how the book collection was used and the provide services better suited to the undergraduates

- Replaced with new department (Department of Library instruction and Advisement) designed to carry out as many of the possible of the library's objectives of general education, lib instruction, counseling, reference and reader's advisory
 - Placed importance on the student personnel point of view, the student as an individual person not just a question or task to deal with.
 - New department staffed by 5 Counselor Librarian instead of ref librarians. Each counselor librarians had specific tasks.
 - Advisory information desk (former reference desk) – tasks included reference work, RA, assistance in educational, vocational, social, emotional, personal counseling
 - Through the counseling process, the librarians encouraged students to think through their research problem and developed well-formed questions before searching. Counseling made up a small part statistically but was time-consuming. Involved bibliotherapy
- Birdi, Wilson, and Hin Man Tso (2009)
 - The researchers looked at the role of empathy in community librarian ship and the role of empathy in service to minority ethnic users. They focused on the relationship between the cultural identities of library staff and their ability to empathize with the public. “It is concluded that empathy plays a role in facilitating effective communication between staff and users, but that a distinction should be made between intuitive and cognitive empathy, in considering the potential of staff training to develop appropriate levels of emotional response to members of all communities.” (p. 81).
 - Can empathy be taught or is it intuitive?
 - Before we can begin to think about training librarians and library staff we, as a library community, must talk seriously about empathy.
 - Birdi and Wilson created a scientific measurement of professional empathy of librarian's service quality. “Through this measurement they explored library staff attitudes towards the community role of the public library, socially excluded groups, and professional roles and responsibilities in addressing exclusion” (p. 83)
 - Another great study by Birdi and Wilson:
 - Birdi, B., Wilson, K., & Cocker, J. (2008). The public library, exclusion and empathy: A literature review. *Library Review*, 57(8), 576–592.

<http://doi.org/10.1108/00242530810899568>
- Angell (2011)
 - Angell criticized library science for it's pragmatic focus instead of philosophical. Very practical and quantifiable but doesn't demonstrate the underlying principals of our field. Without these theoretical foundations, it's hard to advance our field. So many librarians and MLIS students are resistant to theory and philosophy in LIS. In response Angell applies Edith Stein's research on empathy theory to

Library Science. Her research is an interesting model for better understanding patron needs.

- Angell suggested introducing Consciousness Raising groups into libraries. C-R had been used in feminist movement to explore the oppression of women and support bonding among the women in the groups. For libraries, C-R groups could be composed of both library staff and patrons, and will function as a forum in which patrons can discuss positive and negative library experiences, as well as recommend specific materials and services. Thus, librarians will have an opportunity to formally meet and better understand their patrons. In many ways similar to focus groups, but incorporating the thoughts and feelings of both groups and with the end of goal of effecting change.

Interactive Group Stuff

- Should librarians be empathetic to patrons? Is this an additional role for us? Is it already a part of what we do?
- What does empathy look like in the library? Some examples please! What are some of your concerns in being an empathetic librarian?
- Describe a situation that might provoke a librarian's empathy that could occur in a library. How would you respond? Is there a right and wrong way to respond?
- Can empathy be taught? Could library staff be trained to be empathetic? Or are empathetic people naturally drawn to the profession? How are we taught to be empathetic in LIS? How could that teaching be improved?
 - In all honesty, I'm not sure.