

*"The environment seems as much to interfere with as to facilitate an effective reference interview"*

# REFERENCE SUCCESS:

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## Does the 55 Percent Rule Tell the Whole Story?

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By Joan C. Durrance

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A DECADE AGO, Mary Jo Lynch suggested that the public may not be well served by the environment in which the reference interview takes place.<sup>1</sup> That environment, she noted, results in interviews between librarians and library users (this profession is still reticent about the term "client") that are quite different from those conducted by other professionals.

There has been little investigation into the influence of the environment on the success of the reference interview. In addition, the public knows very little about the work of the professionals in libraries who are called, quaintly, librarians. Studies

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show that although 95 percent of the general public know that they can check books out of the library, far fewer know that libraries provide information service.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, those who study the information needs of citizens find that only a small proportion of the public seeks information at the library.<sup>3</sup>

Accuracy has become the primary measure of the success of the reference interview. Using accuracy as the criterion for success, research using unobtrusive testing so consistently shows that librarians provide the correct answer only about half the time that Herson and McClure have coined the 55 percent rule to describe reference success.<sup>4</sup>

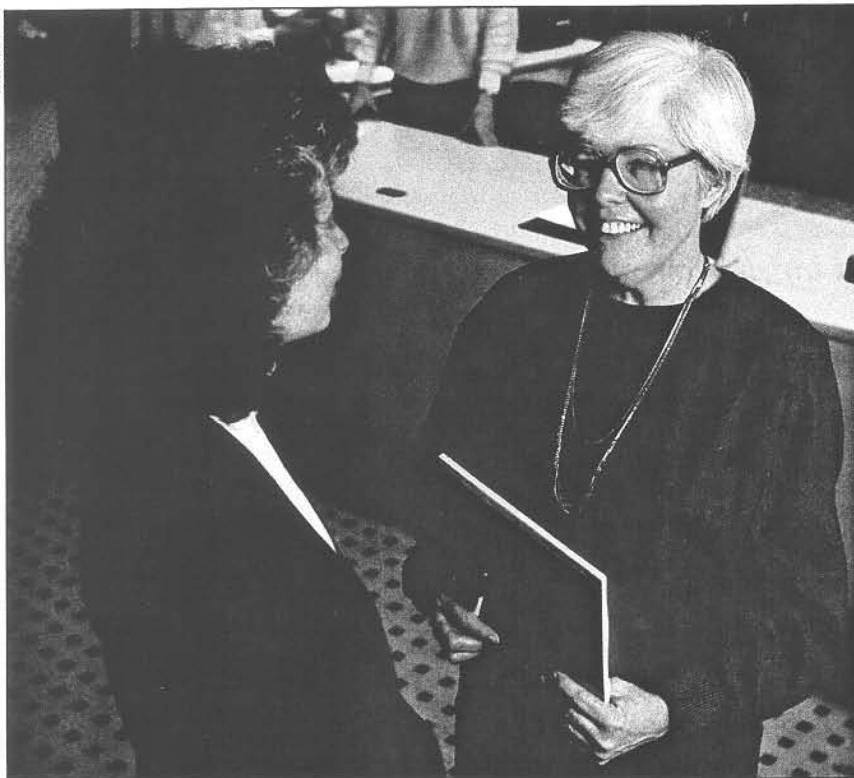
The premise of these studies is that librarians fall short as information providers because they frequently fail to give accurate information. Most studies of the reference interview do not examine the impact of

the environment in which it occurs. Given the nature of the environment, accuracy may not be the most appropriate measure of success.

In most professions, the client-professional interaction is enhanced by an environment that the professional controls and the client understands. Most professionals shape and control the environment in which they work and use it as a means of communicating and facilitating their client interactions. It determines the nature of the encounter between the professional and the client—physician and patient, attorney and client, loan officer and customer.

### The study

This article, based on an unobtrusive study of the reference interview and the environment in which it occurs, examines the influence of 1) the setting of the reference interview on the interaction, and 2) accu-



*Author Joan Durrance (r.) conducts a reference interview at the library of the University of Michigan*

racy and several other factors associated with librarian behavior on the success of the reference interview. Although most researchers who apply unobtrusive techniques use accuracy as the measure of reference interview success, the measure chosen by this researcher is the willingness of the inquirer to return to the same staff member at a later time.

The study was carried out over a one-year period by master's students enrolled in the University of Michigan School of Information and Library Studies. These students observed 266 reference interviews in 142 public, academic, and special libraries. Before participating in the study, students examined the literature of the reference interview and were prepared for data collection by the principal investigator.

Observations were made during breaks in the academic calendar to avoid oversampling libraries in the Ann Arbor area. Students prepared a reference question of importance to them with which to test the *modus operandi* of reference librarians. They either asked their question of a library staff member themselves or observed the interaction between a colleague and a librarian. In either case the librarian was not aware of the observation.

The data collection instrument included questions developed and reported in the literature by Schwartz and Eakin, Olsen, and Durrance; it

provided for structured responses to 1) the activity of the staff member when the observer approached him or her; 2) the question and the nature of the response; and 3) library staff performance based on interpersonal behavior, interviewing skill, and search strategy.<sup>5</sup> (See Tables 1, 2, and 3.)

The observers were asked to decide if the staff member who responded to the inquiry was a librarian and to rank the contribution of various environmental and other clues to the decision. They were to indicate, given the option, whether they would return to the person who answered their question. This became the operational measure of success and was used to test the impact of interpersonal behavior and interviewing skills on the success of the reference interview.

Immediately following each interview, observers recorded responses to the reference interview on a five-page data-collection instrument, and each observer also submitted a narrative description of the environment and the interaction. Data were analyzed using statistical and text-organizing packages. Selected observations of students are included in this article.

### Results: the libraries

The interviews were conducted in libraries from Vermont to California, with about two thirds in Michigan: 58% were in public libraries,

37% in academic, and the rest in government or special libraries.<sup>6</sup> In all, 142 different libraries were visited. Several libraries in the Ann Arbor area had multiple visits, but 86% of the libraries were visited either once or twice. Libraries in this study varied in size from public libraries with less than 49,000 volumes to the Library of Congress. Most academic libraries had between 150,000 and 499,000 volumes. Public libraries ran the full range of size, but 90% had fewer than 500,000 volumes; 19% less than 49,999; 24%, 50,000–99,999; and 17%, 100,000–499,999.

### The reference environment

Although the physical arrangement of the reference area in these libraries varied considerably, the setting of the reference interview was usually either a desk or a counter marked "Reference" or "Information" or not marked at all. Occasionally the Reference Desk was separate from an Information Desk, where the function was to respond to directional questions and to screen and route questions.

Typically the observer described a situation where the librarian was seated at a desk, usually equipped with a telephone and sometimes also with a computer. The library staff member, often seated at the desk, usually faced the patron who stood. There was seldom a chair provided for the inquirer. Most librarians did not remain seated, however. They frequently moved around the reference room taking the inquirer to various sources of information. When a counter separated the librarian from the inquirer, both were likely to stand during the interviews.

The specific physical arrangement was less important than the messages transmitted to the inquirer by the environment about the functions that are supposed to occur at that desk. Some environments communicated very poorly to these trained observers, who are, of course, much more sophisticated than the general public about what goes on in libraries. Many observers had trouble identifying the reference desk.

Some environments clearly indicated the function of the desk using, of course, library terminology, "Reference Desk"; others identified the type of occupant; some even identified the individual at the desk, "Mary Doe, Reference Librarian."

In the environment created by the physician, the patient always

knows when s/he is talking with the doctor. The librarian's environment does not send such clear messages. The observers in this study were asked to indicate whether they thought they had worked with a librarian, a library assistant, or a student and, in addition, how sure they were of their choice.

This question, of course, would seldom need to be asked of the intelligent client of any other professional. One hundred and thirty-six of the observers (68%) said that they thought they had worked with a librarian, but only 35% of them felt quite sure. Forty-six of the observers thought they had worked with an assistant of some sort, but only four were absolutely sure; 17 believed they had worked with a student, but only one had no doubts.

### Signage & other environmental clues

The use of signage or a name tag sometimes provided proof of identity.

It was easy for me to identify the staff member who helped me as an information professional since she was wearing a tag with her name and title.

Signage helps the environment make more sense to the user. Signage varied considerably in these libraries. Signs indicating the *functions* occurring at a desk, i.e., "Reference" or "Information," were more frequent than those indicating the *performer* of the function, "Reference Librarian" or "Librarian." (It is interesting to remember that reference terminology was put into place nearly a century ago and at that time reflected more nearly what actually occurred at the reference desk—in most libraries, patrons were *referred* to books and librarians did not provide information services.) Nameplates or tags indicating the name of the performer were seen even less frequently.

Many observers relied on environmental clues, including signs, when deciding if the staff member who served them was a librarian; 58% ranked environmental clues at four or five (on a scale of one to five) as factors that led them to believe that the staff member with whom they had been working was a librarian. Observers who were sure that the individual they had dealt with was a librarian often extrapolated that information from clues provided by signs.

The sign on the wall behind the desk said "Reference Librarian."

There was a large sign in front of the medium-sized oak desk labeled "Information" and a desktop sign reading, "Lettie Baldwin, Librarian."

Signage was at times a source of confusion. Does a sign over the desk that says "Information" or "Reference" mean that anyone who is seated behind the desk is a librarian? Or, does a sign reading "Reference Librarian," which intermittently appears and disappears from a desk, mean, as one observer concluded, that when the sign is there a librarian is working and when it is absent, the staff member is not a librarian?

When there were no clues such as signage or a name tag, observers used other environmental clues to help them make their decisions.

I was able to identify the individual who assisted me as a staff member because she walked out of a staff-only area behind the counter and approached the telephone which was on the counter.

The environment may send erroneous messages. At one reference desk in a university divisional library late one evening, the observer approached a young man seated behind a reference desk with a reference question, only to be told that he was a friend of the "librarian." When the "librarian" emerged from the stacks,

the observer concluded from her age, her casual clothing, and her bright pink hair that she was not a librarian either.

### Appearance

Appearance of the staff member (including age and dress) plays an important role in helping observers make decisions, especially when the environment fails to send a clear message; 56% used environmental clues to decide if they had been working with a librarian. Well-dressed, older individuals were assumed to be librarians while casually dressed, younger people were thought to be students.

I think the man I worked with was a librarian. He was older and fairly well dressed. A person approximately 20 years of age and wearing jeans who had a picture ID on her shirt came up to him and waited deferentially until he had stopped helping me. I assume she was an assistant of some sort.

### Evidence of professional skill

The actions of staff members played an important part in the decisions of observers; 63% drew conclusions based on the expertise showed by the staff member. Interviewing and listening skills, including being able to determine the level of need, and the ability to provide an appropriate answer, were seen as evidence of professional skill.

Accuracy, the use of an effective search strategy, and providing a satisfactory response were even more closely associated with the professional librarian by the observers. These qualities helped the observers decide that they had been working with a librarian. Evidence of expertise led students to believe that certain staff members were librarians, while others who apparently lacked expertise were thought to be students or nonprofessionals.

**Table 1**  
**Interpersonal Skill of the Librarian**

Rank	Friendly		Interested		Self-Confident		Nonjudgmental		Comfortable	
	NLTR	WR	NLTR	WR	NLTR	WR	NLTR	WR	NLTR	WR
1 (Low)	13 (100%)	0 (0%)	19 (94%)	1 (6%)	7 (100%)	0 (0%)	5 (100%)	0 (0%)	8 (100%)	0 (0%)
2	24 (89)	5 (11)	29 (90)	4 (10)	20 (76)	6 (24)	10 (73)	3 (27)	40 (96)	2 (4)
3	29 (60)	18 (40)	26 (49)	28 (51)	26 (53)	21 (47)	23 (71)	9 (29)	30 (54)	26 (46)
4	19 (21)	57 (79)	14 (15)	73 (85)	26 (31)	58 (69)	22 (34)	36 (66)	15 (15)	65 (85)
5 (High)	12 (12)	89 (88)	9 (14)	62 (86)	18 (19)	84 (81)	30 (23)	110 (77)	6 (9)	76 (91)
<b>Total</b>	<b>97 (36%)</b>	<b>169 (64%)</b>	<b>97 (37%)</b>	<b>168 (63%)</b>	<b>97 (36%)</b>	<b>169 (64%)</b>	<b>90 (36%)</b>	<b>158 (64%)</b>	<b>99 (37%)</b>	<b>169 (63%)</b>

NLTR = Not Likely To Return; WR = Would Return

**Table 2**  
**Interviewing and Listening Skills**

Rank	Interview Skill		Determined Need		Met Time Frame	
	NLTR	WR	NLTR	WR	NLTR	WR
1 (Low)	32 (85%)	5 (15%)	30 (87%)	3 (13%)	25 (86%)	3 (14%)
2	33 (85)	6 (15)	28 (78)	7 (22)	21 (76)	8 (24)
3	20 (38)	37 (62)	21 (44)	32 (56)	17 (46)	15 (54)
4	9 (16)	57 (85)	15 (19)	52 (81)	17 (26)	43 (74)
5 (High)	1 (2)	57 (98)	1 (2)	69 (98)	11 (14)	86 (86)
<b>Total</b>	<b>95 (37%)</b>	<b>162 (63%)</b>	<b>95 (37%)</b>	<b>163 (63%)</b>	<b>91 (37%)</b>	<b>155 (63%)</b>

NLTR = Not Likely To Return; WR = Would Return

**Table 3**  
**Searching Skills**

Rank	Strategy		Accuracy		Satisfied w/answer	
	NLTR	WR	NLTR	WR	NLTR	WR
1 (Low)	14 (90%)	1 (10%)	22 (94%)	1 (6%)	37 (84%)	6 (16%)
2	26 (84)	4 (16)	24 (76)	9 (24)	35 (73)	10 (27)
3	28 (54)	25 (46)	18 (48)	15 (52)	15 (41)	16 (59)
4	15 (22)	54 (78)	12 (21)	47 (79)	9 (20)	34 (60)
5 (High)	11 (14)	80 (86)	15 (18)	82 (82)	11 (13)	93 (87)
<b>Total</b>	<b>94 (36%)</b>	<b>164 (64%)</b>	<b>91 (37%)</b>	<b>154 (63%)</b>	<b>107 (40%)</b>	<b>159 (60%)</b>

NLTR = Not Likely To Return; WR = Would Return

with another question at a later time. This measure permits the examination of accuracy within the context of other factors that contribute both to the success of the reference interview and the client professional relationship.

"Willingness to return" permits a comparison of accuracy and other factors, including staff activity upon approach, the observer's ability to identify the professional, interpersonal style, interviewing skill, and search strategies used. Using this definition of success, approximately 63 percent of the interviews were successful, a figure only slightly higher than that which is obtained when accuracy is used as the measure of success.

### Activity of staff upon approach

As Bunge and Murfin found recently, what the staff member was doing when approached seems to have an effect on the success or failure of the interview.<sup>7</sup> When the librarian was either free or had been working with another patron when approached, over half of the observers said that they would probably return to him or her.

Less than one in five said that they would return to a staff member when they found it necessary to wait for him or her to return to the desk, when s/he had been engaged in another activity such as professional work, or when s/he had been in a discussion with another staff member. Some of the observers whose question had interrupted a library staff member's activity reported that the librarian's body language or manner conveyed a message that what had been going on was of more importance than the interrupting question.

### Name identification

Present practice discourages name identification. However, there is no evidence to indicate that this results in effective practice and there is a growing body of writing that criticizes this practice.<sup>8</sup> It is not surprising then, that less than one in five of the observers discovered the name of the librarian. Those who did were more than three times as likely to say that they would return to that individual another time. One observer who learned the name of the library staff member was especially satisfied with the reference interview.

After she had completed the reference discussion, the librarian said, "My name is Mrs. Drummond, and if you

The librarian asked open-ended questions and paraphrased my question and then asked, "Is this what you want?" probing until she was able to find out what I needed.

These clues were often in conjunction with environmental or appearance clues.

While I was never able to positively identify the person who worked with me as a librarian, I made the assumption that she was, based on two factors: she was sitting at the counter and I observed her helping students with the *Reader's Guide*. (The library provided no other clues).

Occasionally conflicting clues confused the observers.

I got mixed signals. Her competence level was very high, but she looked like a student.

When libraries were initially designed, the information function was minimal, but past decades have brought major changes in information giving in libraries. If the trained observer has difficulty interpreting the present reference interview environment, it is no wonder that the general public has little understanding of the information functions of libraries.

The findings presented above suggest that many libraries may make it necessary for librarians to compensate for a dysfunctional reference environment and that measures of success should reflect its influence.

### Willingness to return

The reference environment that sends out garbled messages about the information function places an extra burden on librarians and limits the effectiveness of the reference interview. Given the constraints discussed above, the remainder of the article examines the actions of the professionals who operate in this environment and compares accuracy as a measure with other factors.

Accuracy is the primary measure used in unobtrusive studies of the success of the reference interview. It has many advantages as a measure: tests for accuracy are fairly easy for a researcher to construct, replicate, administer, and interpret. However, a number of factors in addition to accuracy contribute to reference success.

In this study, a measure of success was chosen that focuses more broadly on the client-professional interaction—the willingness of the inquirer to return to the staff member

need any more help, I will be back from lunch in a half hour." Needless to say, this librarian was exceptional in all respects.

Several who did not learn the name of the librarian were frustrated by shift changes and the need to start all over again with a new staff member when they returned to the desk after following up on a lead provided by the librarian. One persistent observer who sought to learn the name of a librarian so that his partially answered question might be completed at a later time was rebuffed.

### Variables that influence success

Several researchers have tested factors that are positively associated with providing accurate answers. For example, Gers and Seward reported on factors that contributed toward providing accurate answers in a statewide unobtrusive study.<sup>9</sup> Most of the factors tested in this study, similar to some tested by Gers and Seward, were presented by Schwartz and Eakin.<sup>10</sup>

They may be grouped as follows: 1) the interpersonal skill or style of the librarian, as exhibited by: friendliness, interest in the question, self-confidence, being nonjudgmental, and the ability to make the questioner feel comfortable; 2) interviewing and listening skills, including technique, the ability to determine level of need, and providing an appropriate answer within the questioner's time frame; and 3) the effectiveness of the librarian's approach to the question, including: search strategy, accuracy, and the ability to provide the questioner with a satisfactory answer.

### Interpersonal variables

Librarians varied in their interpersonal skills. Observers frequently gave librarians the highest ranking (5) on the quality of being nonjudgmental (57%); less than four in ten exhibited either a great deal of friendliness or self-confidence; less than a third made the questioner feel quite comfortable; and finally, only slightly more than a quarter showed the highest level of interest in the question.

Comments on the positive effect of the staff member's interpersonal skills on the reference interview show the impact these traits had.

The staff member's openness and friendliness took away any pressure or awkwardness that could be felt when asking for help in this strange, public situation.

Her demeanor was not in the least condescending or forbidding. It invit-

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ed more questions. She was very self-confident.

At the other end of the spectrum, we can see the effect of the negative side (a one or two ranking of these same characteristics); 20% showed very little interest in the question, 18% made the observer feel very uncomfortable, 16% were unfriendly, 12% appeared to lack confidence, and 7% appeared to be nonjudgmental. Some observers commented on these negative traits. At times the discomfort began quite early in the interview, most commonly when the librarian was engaged in another activity. The first example represents an interview that began with an audible sigh and seemed to have deteriorated from there:

This reference interview couldn't have been much more unsatisfactory. The librarian made me feel intrusive. She sighed noisily when I asked my question, was uninterested in my needs, and didn't help me with any alternative suggestions for seeking the information. She never knew whether or not I had been successful; the contrast between the treatment I received and that given to the suited businessmen who were in and out during my visit was extreme.

The man behind the desk—I assume he was a librarian—grimaced upon hearing my inquiry, indicating to me that I had asked a question that would be difficult to answer.

### The inclination to return

Table 1, a composite table, is made up from the cross-tabulations between the observer's decision to return to the staff member, and the 11

interpersonal and skill variables. Those who gave high scores to the librarians on the interpersonal variables of comfort, friendliness, and interest in the question were almost certain to say that, given a choice, they would have returned to the same library staff member. So would those who gave a high ranking on the skill variables, determining need and interviewing ability.

The observers in these 266 reference interviews were far more forgiving when library staff members had weak interviewing skills or gave inaccurate answers than they were if the staff member made them feel uncomfortable, showed no interest, or appeared to be judgmental about the question.

A high score on the quality of being nonjudgmental often worked against a librarian—over 20% of those who ranked the librarian as totally nonjudgmental indicated that they probably would not return to her. This quality seems to be overrated by librarians. Likewise highly self-confident staff do not necessarily inspire those who asked them questions to return; 18% of those who rated self-confidence at five said they would not return to the same librarian.

### Accuracy, etc., influence success

How does accuracy stack up as a success factor? These findings indicate that accuracy is an important, but not the single, crucial key to the success of the reference interview. When observers gave the librarian the lowest score on accuracy (indicating a totally inaccurate answer), 96% said that if given an option, they would *not* go back again to that person. However, when they indicated that the answer had been largely inaccurate (two on a scale of one to five), over one quarter *were inclined to return* to that same librarian.

On the other hand, nine out of ten observers who gave librarians either a one or a two on the interpersonal variables of friendliness, interest in the question, or comfort level said that they would *not* ask the offending staff member another question. In ranking all the factors, these student observers gave the library staff members the highest scores (5) in the area of search skills and accuracy; 41% were quite satisfied with the answer, 40% judged the answer quite accurate, and 35% felt that the strategy was quite appropriate.

As other studies have shown, librarians frequently have poor interviewing skills.<sup>11</sup> Only one quarter of

the librarians were thought to be excellent interviewers (5) and only 27% found out what the questioner really needed. At times, observers expressed their exasperation at staff members who neglected to determine need or who responded poorly to the question.

One commented,

As a reference desk employee, I must continually remind myself not to fall into the trap this librarian fell into—presupposing a ready answer based on a few key words of a question as they related to her knowledge of the sources.

When lack of listening skills or knowledge were combined with poor interpersonal skills, observers were quite unforgiving.

### Questions raised by the study

Although librarians must be concerned about providing accurate responses, widespread use of accuracy as the primary measure of reference success fails to take into consideration the influence of the environment in which most reference interviews take place. The environment seems as much to interfere with as to facilitate an effective reference interview. Observers in some libraries found that the reference desk was not marked in any way; even more often there was no indication of the nature of the occupant of the reference desk.

Because the environment does not send clear messages to the client about the nature of reference service and its providers, librarians must rely heavily on interpersonal skills to make the library user comfortable enough to be willing to ask a stranger an important question.

It may be that the interpersonal skills of the librarian are of crucial importance because they substitute for the knowledge that most clients have about professionals in other fields, including educational background, professional expertise, and name. No other professionals lack these characteristics. This void may explain why observers were more unforgiving of negative interpersonal qualities than other factors.

Because librarians lack "identities," it is more difficult to distinguish each individual's special knowledge. Since the librarian is so closely identified with the environment in which they operate, their expertise is often assumed to be the same as all others who sit in the same room. If the environment remains much as it was 100 years ago,

the nature of the reference interaction is likely to continue to be characterized by the single encounter rather than a true client-professional relationship that occurs over succeeding visits.<sup>12</sup>

The impact of the environment should influence the selection of measures of reference interview success. Researchers must measure the influence of interpersonal qualities and such skills as the ability to provide accurate answers. Appropriate measures are the key to finding out what changes must be made.

This study suggests, given a continuation of the present environment, that librarians must appear more interested in the questions they receive and make greater efforts to make their patrons feel comfortable. They must also improve their interviewing skills and do a much better job of finding out what the patron really needs. Because the environment makes it difficult for a person to go back to the librarian for more information, providing an accurate answer at the time a question is asked may be more important than it would be otherwise.

This study suggests that measuring reference success and taking the corrective action needed to improve reference interviews must be done with the aim of improving the environment as well as increasing the effectiveness of the reference librarians who attempt to operate there. Must we assume that the present reference environment, a vestige of the late 19th century, will continue? How long must the library user interact with an unidentified library staff member at a desk that may not even be marked and that only sometimes identifies the *type* of occupant and even less often its *specific* occupant and virtually *never* indicates their credentials? Are librarians willing to consider altering the environment with the aim of increasing reference success and creating an environment that better serves the public?

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5. The primary contributors in recent years to the study of reference effectiveness using unobtrusive measures have been Hernon and McClure. For a detailed presentation on unobtrusive measures in reference see Peter Hernon & Charles R. McClure. *Unobtrusive Testing and Library Reference Services*. Ablex, 1987.
6. The three sets of characteristics observed in the library staff: interpersonal qualities, interviewing skill and search strategies used were adapted from a checklist developed by Diane G. Schwartz & Dottie Eakin, "Reference Service Standards, Performance Criteria and Evaluation," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 1986, p. 4-8. Selected questions were developed by Linda M. Olson, "Reference Service Evaluation in Medium-Sized Academic Libraries: A Model," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 1984, p. 332-339. Sections of the questionnaire that focused on the environment and the client-professional relationship are based on earlier research by this author, Joan C. Durrance, "The Influence of Reference Practices on the Client-Librarian Relationship," *College and Research Libraries*, 1986, p. 57-67.
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10. Gers & Seward.
11. Schwartz & Eakin.
12. See Hernon & McClure (1986, 1987) and Gers & Seward.