Understanding Empathetic Services: The Role of Empathy in Everyday Library Work

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Abstract

In this paper, the author proposes the term "empathetic services" to describe the social, emotional, and psychological support that librarians provide patrons. The role of empathy in the library has been infrequently researched in library and information science (LIS) literature. However, as demonstrated in the reactions of libraries and librarians during recent social movements, empathy is a critical component of librarianship and routine library work. Although frequently labeled "customer service" or "soft skills," empathetic services encompass the provision of compassion, social justice, and understanding in libraries. As part of the findings, the author identified three significant roles that librarians perform: librarians as an information resource, librarians as an instruction resource, and librarians as a source of social/emotion/psychological support. Using the context of rural school and public libraries, this mixed-method, exploratory study investigates the types of empathy and support that rural school and public librarians currently offer and would like to offer young patrons.

Introduction

Librarians are becoming more aware of the affective shift that influences a patron-librarian interaction.[i] During an interaction, librarians may employ empathy, kindness, and sympathy to fully understand and meet the needs of patrons.[ii] Empathy as a competency of librarianship is infrequently studied in the library and information science (LIS) literature. When researchers do discuss empathy, it often is interpreted as customer service, a by-product of the librarian-patron exchange.[iii] However, librarians are increasingly promoting social services, including connecting patrons with mental health services, providing assistance services for homeless patrons, and hiring social workers as employees of the library.[iv]

The social and community-driven role of librarians is becoming more apparent as librarians push the boundaries of librarianship, providing services that previously have been ignored in scholarly literature. Working as a connector between patrons and needed services, librarians rely upon softer skills that they rarely are prepared for in master's degree programs in Library and Information Studies.[v] These softer skills include "curiosity, initiative, understanding,

communication, [a] sense of professional responsibility, and the ability to overcome and deal with mistakes"—skills that are often discounted in a profession that instead tends to concentrate on information alone.[vi]

This study focuses on rural school and public libraries and the support they currently provide and would like to provide for rural teens. Like urban and suburban libraries, rural libraries are supportive, nurturing, and welcoming environments for young adults.[vii] In small rural communities, the public library is one of the only safe places for young adults to hang out after school, on weekends, and during school breaks.[viii] This is equally true for school libraries.[ix] Although rural communities may appear safer than urban and suburban communities, rural young adults are not immune to problems like crime, drug use, and violence.[x] Rural libraries function as a nurturing environment for young adults, a place where programming, materials, and services are available that encourage healthy behaviors and community participation.[xi]

Empathy can be seen as a core attribute of librarianship alongside an understanding of information literacy, information behavior, and information access. Within the librarian-patron relationship, there is an emotional center that Kuhlthau's Information Search Process expresses and Mellon's discussions of library anxiety among college students highlights.[xii] In an everyday librarian reference encounter, there is an emotional undercurrent to the experience.[xiii] During this interaction, the patron appeals to the librarian in a moment of need. To help, a librarian employs not only background knowledge of information science but also "invisible" empathetic services.

In this article, I propose the term *empathetic services* to refer to those "structured activities carried out one-on-one or in groups and everyday unstructured interactions in which the role of the librarian is to provide social, emotional, and psychological support."[xiv] Akin to pastoral care in which educators provide individualized social and emotional support for students, empathetic services encompass those unseen, and often unacknowledged, services that a librarian provides patrons.[xv] While the concept of empathy within the setting of libraries is not novel, the explicit labeling of this service is new.[xvi] By developing a consistent term for these services, more targeted research can be conducted into the applications of empathy in the library and a framework can be created to prepare pre-professional librarians for future interactions with young library patrons.[xvii] As an integral part of the community, rural libraries offer teen patrons much more than traditional library services, often providing connections to local support services for teens in need or who are dealing with social and emotional stresses. This research is one attempt to draw attention to the need for additional study into empathy in the library, particularly in rural libraries.

Research Questions

This exploratory research proposed two research questions:

RQ1: What types of empathy and support do rural librarians provide rural teens?

RQ2: What empathy and support do rural librarians want to provide rural teens, beyond what they are currently providing?

Literature Review

This literature review provides a broad overview of the major points of interest for this study. The research questions highlight an emphasis on rural librarians and rural youth. The

introduction above lays the groundwork for empathy as a component of librarianship within all types of libraries. The following literature goes more in-depth regarding rural communities and libraries, social services and libraries, and empathy as a concept. By providing more detail about the areas, the research questions will be better understood and supported.

Rural Communities and Libraries

The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as "places with fewer than 2,500 people."[xviii] (Ratcliffe et al. 2006)**.** For the Census Bureau, this includes "all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area" along with rural subcategories such as rural adjacent, rural distant, and frontier.[xix] Another definition comes from the Center for the Study of Rural Libraries, which defines rural "as a place with less than 25,000 people and is outside a metropolitan area."[xx] The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs' Office of Rural Health provides one more definition: rural areas are "any non-urban or non-highly rural area."[xxi]

Each of these definitions is rather unclear, essentially describing what rural communities are not rather than what they are. These definitions do not convey the shared sense of community experienced by rural citizens or how "tightly knit" these communities can be.[xxii] Additionally, these definitions are not reflective of the harsh realities that rural areas experience, including poverty, "mobility disadvantages," isolation, and limited access to human services.[xxiii]

Rural libraries and communities have been neglected in LIS literature, leaving much of the research focused on urban libraries and the patrons that these libraries serve. However, rural libraries serve as strong hubs for their communities, encouraging local entrepreneurship, information literacy, and technology access.[xxiv] For rural youth, libraries may be one of the few available locations in which they can find information about community-based resources (e.g., mental health facilities, pregnancy clinics). Using skills gained through professional experience, librarians reach out to youth through ways that set them apart from parents, teachers, and other community members. Lacking the authoritative position of parents and teachers, librarians are perceived by youth as individuals whom they can reach out to without judgment or criticism.[xxv] Empathy toward teens is of particular interest as this age group is at an emotionally and psychological vulnerable time during which additional empathy is needed.[xxvi] Supportive relationships between librarians and young adults demonstrate the library's ability and desire to provide youth with resources and information of a more personal nature.[xxvii]

Social Services and Libraries

Recently, there has been a wealth of news articles revealing the structures that libraries have developed to assist in the provision of social services within their communities.[xxviii] In many cases, libraries work in conjunction with local community agencies to offer these services, combining librarians' knowledge of information retrieval and access with social agencies' expertise of emotional, psychological, and physical support.[xxix] As one example, in 2009 the San Francisco Public Library became the first library in the United States to employ a full-time social worker to help provide resources for homeless patrons.[xxx] Since then, other public libraries including the Denver Public Library and the Washington, DC, Public Library have followed suit, hiring social workers and nurses to assist their communities' homeless residents.[xxxi]

The majority of these social services focus on an adult population, leaving open the question of how libraries provide similar services to teens. Teens are frequent library users, with the space existing as a "third place" away from school and home where they can find a scene for intellectual, professional, and socio-emotional development.[xxxii] There are scarce anecdotal

reports of libraries offering social services to teens, which suggests that they are currently overlooked as a vulnerable and in-need population.[xxxiii] Likewise, there is little scholarly research into best practices in social services and libraries across age groups. As librarians continue to examine their communities and what is needed to serve them, the necessary provision of social services to youth will become even more apparent. Youth are not a one-size-fits-all group. Different services require and demand staff who can support these services. This is especially true in rural areas, where teens may feel limited by the resources and opportunities available to them or may not know that these resources and opportunities exist.[xxxiv]

Although some may question whether this type of work is the place of libraries to provide, Moxley and Abbas note that "libraries are often at the threshold of social change as reflected in the dynamic change in substantive information and its sources."[xxxv] Libraries are not oblivious to the changing, and sometime tumultuous, world around them. During recent social movements and events such as the Baltimore riots and the Ferguson crisis, libraries played a role in supporting the community by remaining open when other community organizations and services closed their doors. The Ferguson Public Library (MO) and the Enoch Pratt Free Library (MD) demonstrated their empathy and compassion toward their communities by continuing to offer a place of solace and understanding, along with current and up-to-date information and resources.[xxxvi] These libraries are not alone in their innovative work. Libraries have a history of taking on social justice issues and empowering citizens to become champions for justice in their communities.[xxxvii]

Empathy

Librarians have long provided social, psychological, and emotional support to both adult and youth patrons.[xxxviii] Different terms and phrases used within LIS, psychology, education, and sociology literature describe this type of support. In LIS practitioner and scholarly literature, there has not been a reliably used term or label. Empathy, invisible care, pastoral care, general "support," affective dimensions of service, developmental support, and "library as a safe space" are a few of the many terms given to this everyday support.[xxxix]

While not explicitly called "empathy," the empathetic role of librarians for youth is highlighted in Areas II and III of "Young Adults Deserve the Best: YALSA's Competencies in Action."[xl] Area II: Knowledge of Client Group identifies the competency of "become familiar with the development needs of teens in order to provide the most appropriate resources and services" as one that teen librarians should possess.[xli] Area III: Communication, Marketing & Outreach recognizes several empathy-related competencies including:

> Be an advocate for young adults and effectively promote the role of the
> library in serving young adults, demonstrating that the provision of services to
> this group can help young adults build assets, achieve success, and in turn,
> create a stronger community.[xlii]

Advocacy itself is an empathetic act, requiring that an individual enmesh themselves in the emotional and psychological experiences of those for whom the librarian is advocating. Without a deep understanding of the circumstances and experiences of a group or individual, advocacy becomes a challenging task. Libraries and library organizations often discuss advocating for libraries and librarianship; however, advocacy for patrons is an essential component of library work.[xliii] **{AU: OK? Or "component"?}**

Unlike American LIS researchers, international LIS researchers have explored the role of empathy in public librarianship and libraries.[xliv] In a review of public librarianship, exclusion, and empathy, Birdi, Wilson, and Tso study professional empathy as one tool to help combat social exclusion, improve community librarianship, and connect with patrons.[xlv] Social inclusion has become an important aspect of library service in the United Kingdom as public "policy has shifted toward the social responsibility of (particularly publicly funded) services and facilities." Empathy, defined as "the ability to see another person's world through their eyes," plays a critical role in the delivery of "socially inclusive services." Birdi, Wilson, and Tso acknowledge the newness of this concept in librarianship and the need for further research of the practical application of empathy to library work.[xlvi]

Subsequent articles by Birdi, Wilson, and Tso, Birdi and Wilson, Wilson and Birdi, and Miller and Wallis delve deeper into empathy in librarianship and possibilities for training library staff on empathy.[xlvii] Findings of a study by Birdi, Wilson, and Tso suggest that although training staff about empathy is difficult to accomplish due to "personality, belief systems and other individual characteristics," the development of empathic skills among staff can be fostered through the sharing of appropriate knowledge and information.[xlviii] Miller and Wallis apply relational agency theory as a framework for evaluating "empathetic social interaction" between librarians and patrons. The authors assert that empathy is an important characteristic for information professionals to have, and they provide examples for when empathy is necessary, including while collaborating with other staff and patrons, providing quality customer services, developing trust, and during "information counseling or coaching."[xlix] As demonstrated through the research discussed above, although empathy is an unfamiliar concept within LIS, it supports much of the work that librarians already do on a daily basis.

Research Design

Participants

One single-county school district and three public library systems in three separate counties of southwest Georgia served as sites for recruiting librarians. The participants ($n = 7$; three school librarians and four public librarians) were all above the age of eighteen, possessed or were in the process of obtaining an MLIS degree, worked full-time in a library setting, and lived within the southwest Georgia area. While the school librarians worked with youth on a daily basis, the public librarians ranged in their engagement with youth. Two of the public librarians were children and youth librarians, another was an assistant to a children and youth librarian, and the fourth was an assistant director who additionally served as her library system's children and youth librarian until the position could be filled. Consent forms were distributed to the participants, and a brief introductory session was held to introduce the process of the study, what participation would entail, and briefly explain the study's goals. Once the consent forms were signed, the librarians' participation began. Figure 1 provides the pseudonym, gender, librarian status, and age for each participant:

Figure 1. Librarian Participants

Margaret	Female, High School Librarian, 48
Elizabeth	Female, High School Librarian, 43
Kevin	Male, Public Librarian, 25

Molly	Female, Public Librarian, 36
Lisa	Female, Public Librarian, 40
Jessica	Female, Middle School Librarian, 51
Ashley	Female, Public Librarian, 37

Method

Two qualitative methods were used in this study: semi-structured interviews and structured autoethnography. The interview method is one of the most frequently used methods for data collection.[l] In this study, the rural librarian participants took part in individually scheduled interviews during the summer of 2015. Librarian interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes. Each interview took place prior to the participant recording and submitting his/her video autoethnography. Prior to scheduling the librarian interviews, the researcher developed an interview script, allowing room for expanding upon the questions.

Structured autoethnography falls under the umbrella of ethnographic research, but it is distinct from the more classical approaches such as participant and unobtrusive observation.[li] Autoethnography is often used by researchers to reflect upon their experiences during data collection and analysis.[lii] However, it can also be applied as a research method with participants beyond a researcher.[liii] For this study, autoethnography served a dual purpose. In contrast to a formal interview, it allowed participants the opportunity to take time to carefully consider the questions and answer without the presence of the interviewer. Additionally, the privacy of the autoethnography approach provided the librarians with a chance to candidly share their thoughts, feelings, and concerns regarding the prompt questions.

In this study, structured autoethnography took the form of video entries recorded by the seven rural librarian participants. Each librarian spent approximately nine minutes recording his/her video. These videos were recorded using the participants' personal laptops or smartphones using basic video recording software such as QuickTime or iMovie. The method of recording was selected by the participants based on their comfort with the application.

Participants were given pre-written prompts to help guide the video responses they recorded. The participants were provided with the video prompts following the interview. On average, the response time between distribution of the prompt and submission of the autoethnography was one month and sometimes slightly longer with the school librarians. This allowed ample time for the librarians to reflect upon the questions and hone their responses prior to recording the video. The researcher checked in regularly to ensure than the participants understood the prompt and inquired if they needed additional information. These prompts included hypothetical scenarios ("What if?"), allowing participants to reflect on their own experiences with rural teen support, librarianship, and empathetic services.

Data Analysis

For the purposes of this study, the researcher selected Charmaz's approach to grounded theory as the most appropriate data analysis tool.[liv] Following the grounded theory tradition, data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously.[lv] Each of the two sections of data (interviews with rural librarians and video entries with rural librarians) underwent collection and analysis simultaneously. The researcher became familiar with the data by carefully transcribing

each interview and video entry, and in addition to multiple listenings of interview audio recordings and multiple viewings of participant videos. After transcription, initial coding began, followed by multiple visits back to the coded data. A codebook was developed to assist in the iterative process of data analysis. The emergence of categories and themes from the data itself was needed to help develop a clearer understanding of the research questions. Although grounded theory is commonly used for theory construction, this study used grounded theory to assist in discovering key categories that will eventually be used to help in the use of empathetic services for future application in LIS research.[lvi]

Findings

Based on the analysis of the librarian interview transcripts and videos, several key categories emerged: librarian roles, empathetic support, relationships, and rural libraries. In respect to empathetic support, both school and public librarians discussed the balance that they feel is necessary between their professional and emotional roles. While avoiding crossing professional boundaries, the participating librarians still expressed a need to receive more training on how to provide social, emotional, and psychological support. Relationships are central to the school librarian experiences, particularly regarding relationships with students, teachers, parents, and administrators. A more detailed breakdown of categories and codes can be found in Appendix A (librarian interviews) and Appendix B (librarian video autoethnographies).

Analysis of Rural Librarian Interview Transcripts

One category that emerged from the analysis is "librarian roles." For the participants, the major codes in this category are *balancing professional and emotional roles as librarians*, *developing library leadership*, *supporting both teachers and parents*, *identifying what librarians "should" do*, *focusing on "traditional" librarian work*, and *understanding changing needs.* The interview prompt can be found in Appendix C. The interview questions focused on librarians' general support of troubled youth and librarians' support of cyberbullied young adults.

The *balancing professional and emotional roles* code developed largely in response to my questions about support for teen patrons and librarianship. There appeared to be a thin line between supporting teen patrons and becoming overly involved in the personal lives of patrons. Particularly true with the school librarian participants, discussions of certain topics (e.g., cyberbullying, abuse, parental neglect) during the interviews would bring up mentions of school counselors and administrators. Yet the librarians frequently expressed desire for more training on providing social, emotional, and psychological support for young patrons. The code of *developing library leadership* was strongly demonstrated particularly among school librarians. This code referred to taking on additional roles in the school or community, supporting the school, community, and/or library through activities, and overtly seeking more responsibilities. Both school and public librarian participants discussed *supporting both teachers and parents*. However, school librarians more often highlighted how they support teachers and administrators in their day-to-day work while public librarians discussed the ways in which they support the parents of youth patrons and the overall rural community.

Rural librarian participants frequently commented on *identifying what librarians "should" do*. Included in this code are comments about wanting to do more as librarians, personal expectations of how librarians should respond in different situations, and expectations of the profession as a whole. One of the richer codes is *focusing on "traditional" librarian work*,

which involves discussion about the importance of the following: building and maintaining a teen collection, having readers' advisory (RA), encouraging reading, and having physical and online resources in the library about sensitive topics such as cyberbullying, bullying, and homosexuality. Both school and public librarians spent a significant amount of time during the interviews talking about the key role of a library's collection in supporting students intellectually, developmentally, and emotionally.

The code of *understanding changing needs* reflects participating librarians' understanding of the changes occurring locally and nationwide in the need for librarian support of teens. The school librarians revealed a desire for more training and more collaboration with teachers to help better meet these changing patron needs. While participating librarians did not explicitly refer to themselves as advocates for teens, they did discuss interactions with parents, teachers, police officers, and other adults when advocacy played a prominent role.

Another main category that appeared in interviews with rural librarians is "empathetic support." The major codes that fell within the category include *understanding teens*, *relating to teens*, *helping teens*, *listening to teens*, *talking with teens*, *respecting teens*, *library space*, and *mentoring teens*. Both rural school and public librarians believed they understand (perhaps not fully at times) their teen patrons, which they feel improves the quality of their work. This understanding and relating to teens included knowledge of teen behaviors, attitudes, tendencies, inclinations, habits, and emotional-psychological maturity. Helping, listening to, talking with, and respecting teens are all related activities in which the librarians described engaging in during their day-to-day work with teens.

Rural school librarians, in particular, viewed themselves as wanting to be more helpful to students and teachers as well as improving how they demonstrate respect for students and teachers. *Library space* was by far one of the more enthusiastic discussion points for both rural public and school librarians. Again it was the school librarians who spoke repeatedly about making the library a warm, welcoming, and safe place for students. But librarians also commented on individual approaches to how they engage with teen patrons and their customer service philosophies. *Mentoring* occurs as librarians work with teen volunteers as part of more formal, regular volunteering and occasional informal volunteering. Rural school librarians commonly had students with scheduled weekly volunteering who help out with shelving, programming, inventory, and so on. Rural public librarians encountered more as-needed volunteering from teens, which included those teens participating as part of a youth service group or organization or to satisfy required volunteer hours for school.

"Relationships," a third category, also appeared frequently in the interview transcripts. These relationships were with teens, teachers, school administration, and parents. Largely, the rural librarians discussed how they play a supportive role in these relationships. Librarians described the meaningful relationships they have with teen patrons. In each of the interviews with school librarians, comments were made about the differences between the teen/teacher relationship and the teen/librarian relationship. The public librarians commented on the contrast between the teen/librarian relationship and teen/teacher relationship and also on differences from the teen/parent relationship. Librarians ascribed positive, negative, and neutral labels on their general relationships with teens. Overwhelmingly, the relationships between the librarians and teens were identified as positive with only occasional negative interactions with young patrons (e.g., when a librarian needed to quiet down a rowdy group of teens).

Only one librarian, a public librarian, described her relationship with teen patrons as neutral. This label stemmed from her perceived inability to connect with her area's teens and her

confusion over the changing nature of teen services in the general library world. School librarians saw their relationships with teachers and parents as supportive. They provided support for teachers through technology and information and support for parents by sharing information via social media and e-mails. The relationship between librarians and school administration was more nuanced, with school librarians supporting school administration through their work, but also receiving support, referrals, and demands from administration.

One final yet surprisingly smaller category, "rural libraries," arose from analysis. School librarians rarely mentioned the rural location of their school libraries and school system, yet public librarians recognized the role that rurality plays in the work they do with young adults. Rural school librarians referred to students, teachers, administration, parents, and the school environment, but rarely to the rural community they live and work in. Rural public librarians commented on the impact that transportation, funding, poverty, and staffing have on the ability of youth patrons to visit the library, something the school librarians never mentioned. Perhaps this is a result of youth being a more captive audience for school libraries during the school day while youth access to the public library depends on multiple factors.

Analysis of Librarian Video Autoethnography Transcripts

One category, "librarian roles," relates closely to the same category from the librarian interviews. Codes from this category include *balancing professional and emotional roles*, *referring teens to other adults*, *mandatory reporting*, *developing library leadership*, *changing needs*, *collection development*, *formal instruction/programming*, *what librarians "should" do*, *"traditional" librarian work*, *collaboration*, and *advocating for teens*. Similar to the interviews, the autoethnography prompt questions focused on librarians' general support of troubled youth and librarians' support of cyberbullied young adults. These questions can be found in Appendix D.

Librarians articulated the challenges of balancing their professional and emotional roles in the library. Each librarian expressed discomfort with overstepping professional boundaries and becoming too involved in a young patron's life. To help with this discomfort, librarians stated that they would refer teens to other adults, such as counselors, principals, or parents, when encountering instances of suspected cyberbullying, bullying, or abuse. Examples of developing library leadership arose from the additional roles that librarians took on to assist and support teens, planning for more sensitive topic-related staff training, and an expressed desire by school librarians for more collaboration with counselors and teachers to improve how they support teens.

During the videos, both rural school and public librarians spoke about the importance of collection development in supporting teens. Librarians discussed the need for having print and online resources on sensitive topics available in their library collections, the desire to add more sensitive topic resources to their collections, and wanting to share these resources and materials with teachers and counselors. Similar to collection development, the librarians talked at length about developing and providing formal instruction and programming both in the library and as part of planned class visits. School librarians in particular identified collaborative programming that could be developed in part with school counselors, teachers, and the local police department.

Akin to the librarian interviews, there was significant conversation about what a librarian "should" do service-wise in general, as well as in specific situations. Librarians also focused on the "traditional" librarian work they do for both adult and teen patrons. This traditional work includes working reference, collection development, readers' advisory (RA), and technology support. While these activities seem to form the core of the work that participating librarians see

themselves as engaging in daily, librarians also expressed a desire to do more and take on additional roles. Rural school librarians expressed a desire for more collaboration with counselors, teachers, and school administration in developing programming and selecting materials that target sensitive issues. The code of advocating for teens reflects the concern that librarians felt about overstepping professional boundaries yet wanting to promote the safety and well-being of their young adult patrons. Librarians advocate for teens by understanding teens' emotional and psychological development, selecting resources and materials that teens may need, and appealing to other like-minded adults for help.

A second category, "empathetic support," was also reflected in interviews with rural school and public librarians. Many of the same codes from analysis of the interviews were found in the videos. However, some codes were more present in the videos than in the interviews. These codes included *impact on teens*, *diminishing empathetic support*, and *offering encouragement and reassurances*. Throughout the videos, librarians continued to comment upon how they are able to understand teens, relate to teens, provide customer service, and help, listen to, talk with, and respect teens.

Additionally, rural librarians highlighted how much they worried about teen patrons and how often they offered encouragement and reassurances. Librarians' discussions of the encouragements and reassurances they offered were followed by acknowledgments that they would also refer the teen to an outside resource (e.g., counselor, administrator, police department). At times the librarians played down the empathetic support they provide young patrons. Instead, the librarians stressed with pride their teen collection, print and online resources, and readers' advisory. The more supportive, encouraging, and mentoring role that librarians played for teens usually appeared in the video entries as an afterthought. For "rural libraries," the final category in my librarian video analysis, public librarian videos were more inclined to recognize the rurality of their library than school librarians.

Discussion

RQ1: What types of empathy and support do rural librarians provide rural teens?

In the interviews and videos, the librarians discussed three major themes regarding the currently provided empathy and support. These themes include *librarians as an information resource*, *librarians as an instructional resource*, and *librarians as a source of social/emotional/psychological support*.

Librarians as an Information Resource

One of the core tasks for a school or youth services librarian is to assist young patrons with their information needs. Indeed, the reference interview is one of the standards of any MLIS student's education.[lvii] Whether it is face-to-face at the reference desk or virtually through "Ask a Librarian" or text messaging, librarians help young patrons satisfy their information needs through available print and digital resources.[lviii] Librarians have learned to adjust the delivery of information in this new digital world by incorporating social media, texting, and Makerspaces into their libraries' services.[lix]

Participating librarians in this study talked at length about the services they provide teens and how they help young patrons with any type of information need through a range of tools. These librarians often talked about being there for teens when they needed a book or help with a

school assignment and while providing readers' advisory. Elizabeth, a high school librarian, illustrates this support:

> We [she and coworker] let students know that there are lots of places to get information besides websites and direct them where they need to go to get the information. [Name of coworker] will let students go back to her office before the books are cataloged to pick out what they want. I help and support students in whatever they need to know.

Additionally, the librarians see the development of a strong teen collection as an important component of their value as a librarian and the value of their library. Librarians are also aware of the increased need of having physical and online resources on sensitive topics available for teens in these collections (e.g., books on bullying, cyberbullying, homosexuality, rape). While at one time these materials were hidden behind the circulation desk of at least one participating library, they are now integrated into the regular collection, showing a respect for the private nature of these materials and a respect for the teens themselves.

During the interviews and videos of participants, a noticeable hyperawareness that these librarians have of their supportive information role emerged. The librarians focused largely on the more traditional librarian tasks of readers' advisory, resource gathering, and collection development—tasks that are evolving as teens become increasingly engaged online. However, a few librarians ventured into their personal perceptions or feelings about the changing role of the library in the lives of teens. The role and importance of libraries has seen a shift, as demonstrated by a recent Pew Research Center report.[lx] Libraries are in a state of transition, with a change in how the library is used by patrons, including youth, in the United States.[lxi] This shift, while in the early stages in the rural areas of south Georgia, could be seen in the participating librarians' use of social media, attention toward teens, developing collections and programming that are reflective of the current teen culture, and inquiries into digital citizenship and the possibilities of adding it to the librarians' instruction schedule.

Librarians as an Instructional Resource

Librarians support teen patrons through instruction in the form of formal in-house programming, in-class visits, informal one-on-one guidance, and through librarian-designed bookmarks, flyers, and handouts.[lxii] The librarians in this study discussed their instructional role as equally as important as their informational role through phrases such as "formal instruction and programming," "supporting parents," "supporting teachers," and "library leadership." Both school and public librarians frequently emphasized instances of one-on-one instruction with teens in the library. A quote from Margaret, a high school librarian, highlights this role:

> My main role is helping with technology use and helping when they have questions— what to read, read-a-likes, series. It may be a simple question about creating headers on Word. But to them that matters. I'll sit down and help individual students. It's important so I'll will try to do that.

The rural middle and high school librarians offer less in-library programming but more in-class instruction as requested by the teachers. However, for these librarians, this instruction carries over beyond teens and includes teachers, school administrators, and parents. The school librarians, in particular, reported a growth over the past decade in their instructional support of teachers. The rural public librarians discussed the educational component with less intensity than

the school librarians but are more open about the leadership role in education that they have taken up in their communities. Public librarians appeared more engaged in educating the entire community, focusing less on specific age groups or populations and more on supporting the educational and instructional needs of the community as a whole, including teens.

Clearly, the informational and educational support of teen patrons is greatly valued by the participating librarians. In most cases, the librarians expressed a need to do more for their teen patrons either by taking part in more professional development on different issues, offering more in-library programming, or collaborating more with teachers and other members of the community to improve services. The participating librarians focused on more traditional programming and instruction topics rather than socially conscious and sensitive issues like homelessness, cyberbullying, and mental health. Yet, as exhibited through practitioner literature, librarians have begun to take on more socially responsible roles in their communities and schools to the benefit of young patrons in crisis.[lxiii]

Librarians as a Source for Social/Emotional/Psychological Support

For librarians, providing social, emotional, and psychological support typically goes along with other provided services such as readers' advisory, one-on-one tutorials, library design, and informal conversations during programming.[lxiv] While this support is rarely highlighted in LIS literature, it can be seen in various articles regarding dealing with sensitive topics, supporting troubled teens, and in the construction of a teen collection.[lxv] The topic of librarians as an empathetic and compassionate figure in the library has an extensive and complicated history, dating back to Maxfield's (1954) recommendation for "Counselor Librarians" in academic libraries.[lxvi] At times borrowing from the fields of business, psychology, and communication, some LIS researchers have sought ways to improve the social, emotional, and psychological support that librarians provide patrons.[lxvii]

The category of empathetic support emerged naturally during interviews and video entries of the librarians. Most of the librarians did not appear aware of the social, emotional, and psychological support (or empathetic services) that they often provided to their young patrons. However, they spoke frequently about attempting to understand teens, working on relating to teens, providing equal customer service, and discussing the impact their work had on young adult library users. The words "helping," "listening," "talking," and "respecting" arose during conversations in regards to the everyday work of librarians. Jessica, a middle school librarian, described this support as follows: "As a media specialist, I feel that we need to be open to all kids."

Additionally, almost all of the librarians discussed a need to build the school library or teen space in the public library into a comfortable, safe, and welcome environment. The librarians mentioned the design of the library and their attempts through changes in furniture, color schemes, and book displays to welcome young adults into the library. As indicated by the literature, the library as space is a critical companion to offered library services and programming.[lxviii]

While few of the librarians overtly spoke about their social, emotional, and psychological support of teens, it appeared casually through conversations regarding the more traditional librarian tasks and roles. This supportive role did not appear as present in the participant librarians' minds as the informational and instructional support they provide. Often, when the interview would approach the idea of social, emotional, and psychological support, mentions of school counselors, parents, and mandatory reporting laws would enter the librarians'

conversation. This project highlights the lack of awareness of this support role by librarians and the tendency of librarians to diminish the importance of this role in their work as librarians. A broader study including librarians from urban and suburban libraries and communities would be helpful to further reveal the importance and influence of this empathetic support.

RQ2: What empathy and support do rural librarians want to provide rural young adults?

The second research question asks what types of empathy and support rural school and public librarians would like to provide teens during interactions in the library.

Information Resource

Although participating librarians stated that they believe they already provide high-quality library services to teen patrons, they see areas for improvement. As demonstrated through codes relating to *more training*, *more collaboration between teachers and librarians*, *changing needs*, and simply *wanting to do more within the library setting*, librarians spoke to the professional and personal expectations that they have for their informational role in the library. During discussions, librarians were eager to consider ways in which they could add to or improve the services they are currently providing teens. Librarians want to provide more and different types of information to teens by supplementing the print and digital resources that they already had. Many of the librarians recognize that the information needs of teens are changing and that librarians must be aware of these evolving needs. While librarians largely focused on the more traditional provision of information such as collection development, readers' advisory, and technology support, they are also keenly aware of the impact that technology has on the provision of information and the more digitally focused information needs of teens. This attempt at staying current and wanting to know more about what information teens need from actual teens is expressed by Ashley, a public librarian, in the following quote from an interview: "If I'm missing the boat and something's out-of-date, you [the teens] have to tell me. I don't know because I'm old. If I'm really off base with something and we're not doing the type of programming you want, you need to tell me."

Part of the interviews and videos highlighted the increased awareness that librarians had of the changing information demands of teens. Partially this informational role speaks to another code of *balancing professional and emotional roles*. In some of the examples provided by the participating librarians, the information requested was of a more personal and less school-oriented direction. This project is one small step toward beginning discussions about the interconnectedness of information sharing and positive relationship building between librarians and teens.

Instructional Resource

Librarians support teen patrons through instruction in the form of formal in-house programming, in-class visits, informal one-on-one guidance, and through librarian-designed bookmarks, flyers, and handouts.[lxix] Often this instructional role is focused on teen patrons, but librarians do and should provide resources for the support system of teens, which includes teachers, families, and communities.[lxx]

Similar to serving as an information resource, participating librarians also want to improve the quality and quantity of their instructional and educational roles. This awareness seemed to be the clearest when speaking with school librarians. The codes *supporting teachers*,

library leadership, and *advocating for teens* demonstrate this increased need to support young adults through education that is tailored to their needs. School librarians spoke frequently about wanting to take up more of a teacher role whether in the classroom or teaching within the library. Public librarians focused more on improvements that could be made to in-house programming, particularly education about life skills, college readiness, and career support. This type of desired programming appeared in conversations with librarians who want to assist teens in their lives post–young adulthood. They realize that this education is not being satisfied in schools or through other community organizations and believe that it is up to the public library to assist in some way. As Lisa, a public librarian, noted, "We would like to see more movement toward getting them prepared for life after high school or even in high school. Like, how to do a job interview, how to dress for an interview, how to do a résumé. These are the types of programs that we tend to have teens turn out for."

Throughout librarian interviews and video entries, the participants demonstrate an intense awareness of the need to understand teen behavior, inclinations, habits, and emotional-psychological maturity. This awareness suggests that a compassionate and empathetic relationship exists between librarians and their teen patrons. Using these relationships, librarians hope to design and conduct instructional programming that best meets the needs of their young patrons. This is not a suggestion that librarians design and conduct a formal scan of the information and instructional requests of local teens. Instead, librarians hope to design and provide programming and instructional services based upon personal interactions and exchanges with their teen patrons.

Social/Emotional/Psychological/Empathetic

As discussed in interviews and videos with participating librarians, empathetic services—those structured activities carried out one-on-one or in groups and everyday unstructured interactions in which the role of the librarian is to provide social, emotional, and psychological support—are regularly provided to teens. Both school and public librarians discussed the one-on-one support they provide students through technology tutorials, readers' advisory, casual interactions in the library, and during programming. Librarians also discussed their use of library space to provide a comfortable, safe, and welcoming environment for their teen patrons. Participating libraries recognize that the relationship they have with teens is different than the relationship teens have with teachers, parents, and school administration. As Jessica, a middle school librarian, noted: "I have a good relationship with the students. It's different from students' relationships with teachers. They can talk to me or [another librarian in the school library] about things they may not be able to with a teacher. I have a lot of students who come in [who] maybe don't get the attention they need in the classroom. But they get it in the library." However, librarians often diminished or overlooked this supportive role that they play in the lives of young adults. Instead, the librarians focused on the informational and instructional support they offer students. The participating librarians appeared to struggle when articulating how they support students on a more personal, social-emotional level, even though they offered anecdotes about students sharing personal and sometimes private information with them.

Even though the rural librarians could not clearly identify the social/emotional/psychological or more empathetic support they provide young patrons, this type of support emerged in the librarians' interviews and videos as necessary to have when working with teens. This is particularly true when the librarians highlighted the types of support they would like to offer teen patrons in their library. The librarians are uniquely aware of the social,

emotional, and psychological development of the teens they serve. While the librarians may not have been able to label this support, they appear to be conscious of the impact of the work that they do with teen patrons, and they see their work as having some role in the happiness and well-being of these patrons. In short, their professional work matters and the health and happiness of their young patrons matter to the librarians.

Conclusion

As illustrated in the findings and discussion, the participating librarians see themselves primarily as serving youth patrons through the provision of information and in one-on-one and in-class instruction. Perhaps most understood in LIS literature are the roles of librarians as both an information resource and instructional resource.[lxxi] Both of these roles have undergone significant changes, as society becomes more online savvy and mobile. While these two roles remain critical, there emerges a third role within librarianship, that of the empathetic librarian.

      The librarians in this study demonstrated a lack of awareness regarding their empathetic support of students. Although they did not acknowledge this support explicitly, the librarians' comments about understanding teens, respecting teens, listening to teens, and making the library a comfortable and safe space for teens reveals how these librarians have embraced their empathetic role in the library.

      LIS educators and library management must make it a priority to highlight the importance of empathetic services in librarianship, encouraging pre-service and practicing librarians to embrace this critical service that libraries have been delivering patrons. Additionally, this is an opportunity to clearly articulate how librarians can offer empathetic services while also maintaining professional boundaries, ensuring that librarians know when patrons are reaching out for help with minor and major situations. This paper discusses the role of empathy in the everyday work of librarians and introduces the concept of empathetic services as a critical component of librarianship.

Appendix A

Interview Transcript: Librarian Categories and Codes

Interview Transcript Librarian Categories and Codes	
Category	*Code*
Librarian Roles	Balancing professional and emotional roles Referring teens to other adults Library leadership Changes in needs for librarian support Supporting teachers Supporting parents Collection development Formal instruction/development What librarians "should" do "Traditional" librarian work Advocating for teens
Empathetic support	Understanding teens Relating to teens Customer service Impact on teens Impact of working with teens on librarians Informal instruction (one-on-one w/ teens) Helping Listening Talking Respecting Worrying about teens Offering encouragement and reassurance Library space Mentoring Learning from parenting
Relationships	Teens Teachers Parents School administration Church/religion
Rural Libraries	Importance of community What rural libraries provide communities Challenges

Appendix B

Video Autoethnography Transcript: Librarian Categories and Codes

Video Autoethnography Transcript Librarian Categories and Codes	
Category	*Code*
Experiencing/witnessing cyberbullying	Dealing/coping with cyberbullying/drama Drama among adults Understanding adult online aggressive behaviors Not understanding adult online aggressive behaviors
Librarian roles	Balancing professional and emotional roles Referring teens to other adults Mandatory reporting Library leadership "Changing needs" Collection development Formal instruction/programming What librarians "should" do "Traditional" librarian work Collaboration Advocating for teens
Empathetic support	Understanding teens Relating to teens Customer service Impact on teens Helping Listening Talking Respecting Worrying about teens Diminishing empathetic support Offering encouragement and reassurance Library space
Rural libraries	Importance of community What rural libraries provide communities Challenges

Appendix C

Questions for Librarian Participants (~45-Minute Interview)

1. What do you believe is the librarian's role in supporting teens?
How do you provide general support for teens who use your library?
2. How would you describe your relationship with your teen patrons?
3. Do you think your relationships with teen patrons are mostly positive or negative? What are some examples of your interactions with teens?
4. Which areas do you believe librarians currently provide adequate support for teens?
5. Which areas do you believe librarians currently do not provide adequate support for teens?
6. Which areas do you believe librarians currently provide adequate support for cyberbullied teens?
7. Which areas do you believe librarians currently do not provide adequate support for cyberbullied teens?
8. What types of support do you think librarians should provide cyberbullied teens?
9. Do you believe this support should be expanded or improved?
    If "yes" response, what are some ways you feel the support could be improved?

    If "no" response, why do you think that current support is adequate or that librarians have no need to improve?

Appendix D

Structured Autoethnography Prompt: Librarian Participants

<u>Instructions:</u>

You are asked to record one video entry. This video should be approximately 10 minutes, but you may talk as long as you like. These questions are intended to serve as a guide for your responses. First, read over the following questions. Then, record your responses to these questions reflecting on your experience using social media. If you feel unsure of a question, please skip the question or reply in a way that feels more comfortable to you. *Only the researcher will hear what you say during this video. This video will not be available to the public or anyone else.*

<u>Questions:</u>

1. What types of cyberbullying have you experienced or witnessed while on social media? *Do not use full names or identify people. Only use first names or general descriptions.*
2. What types of support do you currently provide teens?
3. What types of support do you think librarians should offer teens?
4. What if you suspect that a teen/student is a victim of cyberbullying, what resources would you provide him or her to help end or cope with the bullying?
5. What would you do if a teen/student reported being cyberbullied or witnessing cyberbullying to you?

After you have recorded this video entry, please upload the video to https://dropbox.***.***.edu/dropoff.php. If you have any questions, problems, or concerns, please contact the researcher by e-mail ***@my.fsu.edu or by phone (***) ***-****.

Thank you for your participation!

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