

Reference Librarians' Personal Theories of Practice: A New Approach to Studying Reference Service

Amy VanScoy

Overview

Much research to date has focused on the behaviors of reference librarians and on the reactions of library users to these behaviors. An area that has received less attention is reference librarians' perceptions of their work, how they construe reference services, and their thinking, beliefs, values, and attitudes. Models of reference service addressing the mental constructs that influence both the thoughts and actions of reference librarians might help us better deal with expanding demands for reference service. A new approach for examining these thoughts and attitudes is identifying reference librarians' personal theories of practice. Personal theories of practice are the informal, often implicit theories that professionals hold about their practice. In other professions, such as teaching, nursing, and counseling, research on personal theories of practice has contributed to better understanding of work in these professions and improvements in professional education and professional development. Similar research and application in librarianship could increase understanding of reference service and contribute to professional education and professional development opportunities for reference librarians. This chapter explores the concept of personal theories of practice, describes how they have been studied in other professions, and explores the potential for such study for reference librarianship.

Introduction

Diane Zabel (2007) used the term "reference renaissance" to describe the current renewal of interest in reference services, represented by creativity and experimentation among reference librarians. There are many examples of how this renaissance has expanded reference services into new territory. In-person reference is increasingly occurring in information commons where the mission and range of

questions is broader. Virtual reference is expanding from simple chat to virtual worlds like Second Life. As the activities that constitute reference service continue to expand, research into the nature and diversity of reference service is ever more important. Much research to date has focused on the behaviors of reference librarians and on the reactions of library users to these behaviors. An area that has received less attention is reference librarians' perceptions of their work, how they construe reference services, and their thinking, beliefs, values, and attitudes. Models of reference service addressing the mental constructs that influence both the thoughts and actions of reference librarians might help the profession better deal with expanding demands for reference service. Scholarship in this area could reveal the diversity of approaches that creative, experienced librarians bring to their work and contribute to the flourishing of reference services.

One such approach that has not yet been explored in library and information science is identifying personal theories of practice. This chapter explores the concept of personal theories of practice and their relevance for reference librarianship. Enlightening research on personal theories of practitioners in teaching, nursing, and counseling is described. From this research, as well as related research in library and information science, tentative suppositions are made for what the author may find in her research in the area of reference services and how these findings might contribute to the renaissance of reference services.

What Are Personal Theories of Practice?

Personal theories are informal theories about how the world works. Individuals use them to make sense of things and predict what will happen. These personal theories influence behavior whether individuals are conscious of them or not. Reference practitioners have personal theories about reference service, about their role as reference providers, and about what constitutes successful reference interactions. Examining these personal theories and naming them could have a powerful impact on personal practice as well as on the general understanding of reference service.

A variety of terms have been used to describe the concept addressed in this chapter, such as personal practical theories, implicit theories, tacit theories, and personal practical knowledge. This variety of terms is a challenge for both researchers and practitioners. Pajares (1992) recognized the challenge of studying this concept when a common terminology is not used; he argued for "beliefs" to refer to this concept. The term *beliefs*, however, seems loaded with meaning beyond the workplace context. The term *personal theories of practice* is in common use in the research literature and emphasizes both the practical (workplace-related) and personal (informal and individual) nature of the concept.

Personal theories of practice are the informal, often implicit, theories for what happens in professional work. Several decades of research on personal theories of practice in other professions have generated a number of definitions that help to explain the concept. Sanders and McCutcheon (1986) are often cited as experts in the development of the concept of practical theories of teaching. They defined the concept in this way:

Practical theories of teaching are the conceptual structures and visions that provide teachers with reason for acting as they do, and for choosing teaching activities and curriculum materials they choose in order to be effective. They are the principles or propositions that undergird and guide teachers' appreciations, decisions, and actions. (pp. 54–55)

Cornett, Yeotis, and Terwilliger (1990) described them as “the systematic set of beliefs [theories] which guide the teacher and come from prior life experiences [personal] and classroom experiences [practical]” (p. 520). Cole (1990) stated that personal theories of practice are “informal and unvalidated (in the scientific sense) and in most case remain unarticulated; yet they are the personal foundations on which an individual's professional practice is built” (p. 203).

The concept of personal theories comes from George Kelly's (1955) work in clinical psychology. His personal construct theory has generated a half century of study, not only in psychology but in other fields, including library and information science (e.g., Crudge & Johnson, 2004, 2007; Potthoff, Weis, Montanelli, & Murbach, 2000; McKnight, 2000). The idea behind this concept is that people create hypotheses about what is going on in their own lives and then accept or reject them based on the evidence they gather from their work. These personal theories can change or they can become entrenched and resist change, despite evidence to the contrary.

A fictional example that illustrates this concept might be a librarian who has a general belief that students do not really care about their research projects and that they procrastinate, starting their research at the last minute. This belief affects how the librarian interprets information about the student and how she behaves. Thinking of this belief as a personal theory provides a new perspective. This librarian “hypothesizes” that students do not care about research. As students continue to request help at the last minute, this hypothesis is confirmed. The quality of the librarian's service and her engagement in the transaction are likely to be low, based on the theory she is using to interpret the situation. If a student does ask for research advice long before the assignment deadline, the librarian could use this new evidence to re-examine her personal theory and possibly alter her behavior.

So how do personal theories and formal theories interact? This question is addressed by two influential theorists: Donald Schön and Chris Argyris (Argyris & Schön, 1974). They argue that the formal theories that practitioners claim to

use, their “espoused theories,” are not necessarily the same as the practitioners’ “theories-in-use.” Espoused theories are the formal theories that practitioners claim guide their practice. Theories-in-use are the implicit, informal, personal theories that actually influence the work practitioners do. Schön and Argyris emphasize the practitioner as an active creator of knowledge, particularly through reflection.

An illustration of espoused theories in contrast to theories-in-use might be a librarian who, when asked, will refer to the classic reference interview as the framework that guides his practice. Upon observation, however, one might discover that the librarian rarely completes the steps of the reference interview. The reference interview framework may be an espoused theory for this librarian, but his actions are guided by some other, unexamined theory-in-use.

Rando and Menges (1991) argued that both personal theories and formal theories influence behavior, but only explicit personal theories can be critically examined by the practitioner. As long as personal theories remain implicit, they influence behavior and may have unintended consequences, such as the incorrect assumptions about student motivation described in the previous example.

The Study of Personal Theories of Practice in Other Professions

There is a long tradition of examining and using personal theories in the practice of teaching, nursing, and counseling. In these professions, reflecting on personal theories and relating them to formal theories are integral parts of preservice education and professional development. These professions provide a good model for the study of reference librarians because of their similar values on helping and service. Considering its utility for these other professions, there seems to be evidence that this approach merits exploration for library and information science, and particularly for reference.

Depending on the intentions of the researchers and the study design, the personal theories reported in the research can look very different. Qualitative methodologies, especially interviews, participant observation and document review, have been used to provide thick, rich description of practitioners’ personal theories of practice (e.g., Cornett et al, 1990; Radwin, 1995; Gess-Newsome, 2003). Some researchers take a less interpretivist approach, using questionnaires (e.g., Murray & McDonald, 1997) or examining student work (e.g., Levin & He, 2008). The repertory grid technique, developed by George Kelly, is yet another method used to study personal theories of practice (e.g., Hillier, 1998; Salmon, 1993). This broad diversity of approaches creates a variety of perspectives on the topic as well as challenges in comparing results across studies and across professions.

Most of the examples of personal theories of practice in this chapter are drawn from the research on teachers. This body of research is much larger

than that of the other professions. In addition, counseling has established formal theories from which a student is expected to choose in developing his or her own personal theory of counseling. Therefore, most of the research on counselors, rather than exploring unique personal theories, focuses on connecting personal theories to established formal theories.

Important Concepts

Personal theories of practice can be presented as statements or lists of what practitioners' value, what they feel their role is, and how they perceive the dynamic between themselves and their students, patients, or clients. See Table 6.1 for examples of the personal theories of practice expressed by four studies on teachers. A good example from the nursing perspective is Cook, Gilmer, and Bess (2003), who found personal theories such as "nurses provide care for patients," "nursing is a helping profession," and "it involves health promotion and helping the ill regain their health" (p. 313).

Researchers interpret these statements and draw conclusions about practitioner thinking, values, and attitudes. They can also draw conclusions about what is absent from practitioners' personal theories. Cook and colleagues (2003) found that nurses' personal theories focused on "promotion of health" and "treatment of illness" with little acknowledgement of ethical, cultural, legal, and economic issues (p. 316).

Table 6.1. Examples of Personal Theories of Practice from Research in Teaching

| Theory of Practice | Source |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a teacher, you are forever a student • Children should always have choices • Expectation shapes achievements • Assessments are authentic and varied | Levin and He (2008, p. 60) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage participation by students • Teach students equally • Accommodate for different student needs • Prepare for interruptions | Kettle and Sellars (1996, p. 9) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide positive and successful learning experiences • Foster a desire to learn • Prepare students to be worthwhile members of society • Establish and maintain mutual trust and respect | Cole (1990, p. 207) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer visual learning • Talk in kids' terms • Make science learning fun • Help students save face | Cornett, Yeotis, and Terwilliger (1990, p. 521) |

Models

Personal theories of practice can resemble formal theories, showing complex interactions and relationships. Pinnegar and Carter (1990) synthesized their findings into three models of the “dynamics underlying student learning in the classroom” (p. 23). One of the models was “signalling their *respect* for students, teachers give students *responsibility* for learning. Students come to respect the teacher, in turn, and they develop a *rappport* with each other” (p. 24; italics added). They also found that teachers saw links between “confidence, trust and success” (p. 24) and “interest, honest and relevance” (p. 25).

Radwin (1995) developed a model of “knowing the patient” after studying nurses’ core beliefs. “Knowing the patient” involved familiarity and intimacy; was affected by time, experience, and others’ input; and employed strategies of empathizing, matching a pattern, developing a bigger picture, and balancing preferences with differences.

Typologies or Profiles

While some studies are focused on exploring an individual practitioner’s personal theories, others cluster numerous participants’ personal theories and develop typologies or profiles of personal theories. For example, Berman-Rossi (1988) used personal theories of teachers to develop two typologies: rational/empiricist (focused on content) or pragmatist (focused on process) (p. 52). Freire and colleagues (1992) developed typologies of teachers as traditional, experimental, constructivist, pragmatist, and social (p. 503).

Metaphors

The previous examples demonstrate a variety of approaches to studying personal theories of practice in everyday language. Another approach is to study the metaphors used by practitioners, which can reveal their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about their work in a way that direct language may not. Clandinin (1985) felt that metaphorical “images” best capture the emotional and moral dimensions of practitioner beliefs (p. 376). Munby and Russell (1990) had originally investigated personal theories with more direct language, but later stated:

We realized that [our] earlier work . . . improperly emphasized the propositional character of professional knowledge. . . . Our reading of the contemporary work on metaphor showed us that realities are constructed metaphorically and we realized that we could turn this around and explore practitioners’ metaphors to gain insights into how they constructed their professional worlds.
(p. 117)

Asking participants to share their personal theories in the form of metaphors may help to surface personal theories of practice of which practitioners were not

aware. Marshall (1990) claimed that a "path to heightening teachers' awareness of their implicit beliefs systems involves focusing on the metaphors and images they use as they describe their teaching" (p. 128).

Marshall (1990) presented metaphors generated by preservice teachers, such as "disciplinarian, manager, stand-up comedian in a small loud café, wine maker, jumper cables, pillow, octopus, and decathlon participant" (p. 130). In her work with students, she tried to help them find alternatives for their problematic metaphors, such as "warden, lecturer, dispenser of information, vessel, and obstacle" (pp. 130–131). Kettle and Sellars (1996) reported that one preservice teacher described teaching as a basketball game: "It is a team effort. If you continually work at doing well or trying to achieve a goal, the results are certainly worthwhile" (p. 7).

One of Cole's (1990) teacher's used a windmill metaphor:

I am the wind that propels the windmill. The students are the burning coals that brighten with inspiration as the wind hits them. . . . Without the driving force of the wind the windmill becomes stagnant and motionless. The wind gives the windmill a purpose to exist. (p. 216)

The metaphor of teacher as wind demonstrates the critical role of the teacher as perceived by this participant: the teacher gives "purpose" to the classroom. This perception is very different from the teacher studied by Kettle and Sellars who perceives himself or herself as part of the classroom "team."

Another interesting pair of contrasting metaphors are presented by Elbaz and Clandinin. Elbaz's (1981) teacher seemed to perceive an adversarial relationship between school and students. She used images such "a place to hide" to describe her subject matter, and described herself as an "ally" to help students "survive" in school (pp. 63–64). In contrast, Clandinin's (1985) teacher used the image of "classroom as home" (p. 367).

Poulou (2003) studied metaphors used by preservice school counselors to describe the role of the school psychologist: "a ship's captain, a tour guide, a politician, a coach, a conductor, a pilot, a director, a dance teacher, a leader, a shepherd, an experienced climber and an organizer of team games" (p. 382). In all of these metaphors, the school psychologist was an active member of the school. There were also metaphors that seemed to describe the psychologist as separate, but authoritative or guiding: "a Buddhist, a doctor, a grandmother, or the leader of a tribe of Indians" (p. 384).

While these metaphors are interesting in and of themselves, the ultimate goal is to use the metaphors to gain insight into the implicit theories of the practitioners. Examining the personal practical theories of other professionals raises questions about what might surface in studies of reference librarians. How might they describe their role or the principles of their practice? What profiles might be

developed to describe differences among librarians? What metaphors might reference librarians use to describe their work?

What Could This New Approach Yield for Reference Services?

Reference librarians' personal theories about their practice have not yet been studied, although some scholars of reference have called for similar research. Richardson (1995) acknowledged the existence of the "private knowledge" of experienced reference librarians and stated that "a study of deep reference librarianship probably would involve motivations, desires, wants and beliefs in the reference interview" (p. 152). Bunge (1999) asserted that "the technical skills and knowledge of the helping professional seem less important to effective practice than are the beliefs and attitudes held by the professional" (p. 15).

Some reference research has taken small steps toward understanding the thinking, beliefs, and attitudes of reference librarians, including Alafiatayo and colleagues (1996), Watson-Boone (1998), Gerlich (2006), and Doherty (2007). However, these studies focus on the librarians' behaviors and on their stated beliefs. Implicit theories held by reference librarians may take more effort to surface. Although no one has probed the meaning of reference service using librarians' personal theories as a basis for understanding it, existing reference research, research on practitioners in other fields, and anecdotal evidence may provide some clues to what may result from a deliberate study of reference librarians' personal theories of practice.

Possible Themes in Reference Librarians' Personal Theories of Practice

Based on the literature, some suppositions can be made about themes that might emerge from the study of reference librarians' personal theories of practice. Librarians are likely to reveal personal theories of reference service that focus on answering questions or on instruction. Decades of debate on whether information provision or instruction is the most important feature of reference service show that both of the concepts are significant (e.g., Wagers, 1978; Nielsen, 1982). Radford's (1999) work on the importance of interpersonal relationships in reference service suggests another theme likely to surface in study of reference librarians' personal theories of practice. The literature, as well as the intuition of any experienced reference librarian, suggests that the themes of answering questions, instructing, and developing relationships will emerge. How these components interact and how they relate to reference service overall requires more study. In teaching, for example, Pinnegar and Carter (1990) were able to show how various constructs interacted to reveal complicated personal theories for teaching. In studying librarians, findings may show relationships between information provision, instruction, and relationship development. Research into reference librarians'

personal theories of practice could show how these three important components of reference interact and how they are affected by contextual and situational factors.

For some librarians, one of these concepts may be more critical to what they do than others. This sort of finding could allow a typology of personal theories to emerge that show a diversity of approaches to reference service. This typology could be used to better describe and communicate about the diversity of approaches that individual librarians contribute to a reference team.

In addition to these themes, we may discover additional concepts that emerge as essential to a librarian's construction of reference work. Some studies of other professionals have surfaced themes or interactions among themes that had not previously been considered (e.g., Kover, 1995). Giving voice to reference librarians' diverse perceptions of reference service could surface new dimensions of reference service.

Possible Developmental Trends in Reference Librarians' Personal Theories of Practice

Although a typology of diverse personal theories is an attractive outcome, investigation into reference librarians' personal theories of practice may result in a more hierarchical structure. Research on teachers, for example, shows distinct developmental differences between novice and experienced teachers. Novice teachers tend to focus on their own teaching and whether or not students like them, while experienced teachers tend to focus on student learning (e.g., Fox, 1983; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001). As librarians gain more experience and reflect on their practice, they may develop more sophisticated informal theories about reference service.

Could a trend like this exist among reference librarians? What aspects of the work, if any, change in importance from library school and field experience to early career and to expert? Might there be a shift in focus from a librarian-centered perspective to a user-centered perspective, as with teaching?

Possible Relationships between Librarians' Personal Theories and Their Behaviors

Research on how personal theories affect the behavior of reference librarians could explain behaviors that can be cryptic to managers and colleagues. If a librarian doesn't do a full reference interview, for example, it might not be that he or she doesn't value the reference interview but rather that some constraint is preventing his or her values from being implemented.

Studies show that behavior often follows from a professional's personal theories. Gess-Newsome and colleagues (2003) reported that "in all cases there is a degree of consistency between the beliefs of the instructor and the teaching

practices used” (p. 758). Other studies show that constraints such as lack of resources and pressure to get through content can interfere with applying personal theories to practice (e.g., Cole, 1990; Murray & McDonald, 1997).

How do librarians’ personal theories of practice affect their behavior? Do the pressures of time, limited resources, the physical arrangement of the reference desk, or the communication constraints of digital reference affect how librarians’ beliefs manifest themselves? How does reflection on personal theories affect how librarians’ behave? If we understood better what motivates reference librarians’ behaviors, then we might be better able to evaluate and assess reference librarians’ behaviors as well as create opportunities to help improve them.

Possible Sources of Librarians’ Personal Theories of Practice

Another fruitful area of study about professionals in other disciplines is the sources of their personal theories (e.g., Kettle & Sellars, 1996; Levin & He, 2008). Professionals’ personal theories can develop based on past experiences, professional education courses, or practica and internships. What role do basic and advanced reference courses have on librarians’ personal theories of practice? How do practica, field experiences, and graduate assistant positions at the reference desk affect personal theories? How much do reference librarians’ personal theories of practice change during their first years in the profession? Understanding the sources of reference librarians’ personal theories of practice could help in improving professional education for future librarians and professional development opportunities for practicing librarians.

How May This Research Benefit Reference Librarianship?

Identifying librarians’ personal theories of practice has a number of direct applications for improving reference service. For individual librarians, merely recognizing their implicit theories could help them reflect on their practice and make more deliberate choices in their behaviors. Reflecting on one’s personal practical theories, including how they influence one’s behavior and how they may be similar and different to those of one’s colleagues, could provide a useful structure for professional growth and development. Several of the studies on personal theories of practice in other professions reported that participants enjoyed the opportunity to think about and talk about their practice. Some said that they seldom had the opportunity to talk about such things. For example, Levin and He (2008) report that participants were “very positive in their feedback about the value of articulating and assessing their PPTs” (p. 66). Librarians, too, might find pleasure and value in this kind of study.

For groups of librarians, such as a reference department, recognizing and discussing personal theories of practice could lead to appreciation of differences and better communication. Hunter (1997) suggested that his research could be

applied to human-resources-related purposes, such as writing job descriptions, allocating work, selecting staff for project teams, identifying training needs, planning career paths, and performance appraisal (p. 79). Articulating personal theories of practice could facilitate communication between reference departments and library administration. Research into librarian beliefs could be useful not only for individual librarians but also for the library organization as a whole.

For the profession, understanding personal theories of reference librarians could lead to ideas for professional development opportunities. Many current opportunities focus on skills, such as the reference interview, database interfaces, or digital reference products. Workshops or self-evaluations that focus on personal theories of practice might provide more meaningful experiences that could be transferred from current to future reference contexts.

For professional education, integrating exploration and articulation of personal theories to the professional education of reference librarians could ease the transition into the first year of professional work and help develop reflective practice in future professionals. In counseling, courses have been developed to help students recognize their personal theories and relate them to formal theories in their profession (e.g., Spruill & Benshoff, 2000). Such opportunities could occur in reference courses, field experiences, or internships.

For the scholarship of reference, studying reference librarians' personal theories of practice could lead to the development of new models of reference service, grounded in practice. Research on personal theories in other professions has occasionally surfaced aspects not addressed by existing theory. Such research in reference services may yield new areas to explore, as well. Brennan (1973) advocated involving practitioners in adding to or generating theory: "There is a great need for experienced and competent practitioners to feed back to the universities innovative theoretical insights which they have gained through long years of testing and retesting in the action labs of practice" (p. 11). What could reference scholars learn about reference theory from watching "the action labs of practice"? Are practitioners using personal theories that might help us understand what happens during the reference encounter? Could practitioner-generated or practitioner-inspired theory help close the theory/practice gap?

Conclusion

So what are reference librarians' personal theories of practice? What are the informal, implicit theories that guide individual's practice? Studies of librarians that have been conducted for other purposes provide some clues; however, we do not completely understand what is happening inside the minds of reference librarians, about what they think is going on in a reference transaction, what

they think is important, what they think their role is, and what they think the role of library users is.

Several decades of research on practitioner beliefs suggests that this line of inquiry is fruitful and yields results that benefit scholars, practitioners, and educators. Because reference librarianship has aspects in common with teaching, nursing, and counseling, it is logical that such research into the beliefs of reference librarians would be valuable, as well.

Exploratory research into reference librarians' personal theories of practice, from basic statements of purpose to colorful metaphors, would give us insight into how reference librarians perceive their work. Qualitative methods, such as interviews with reference librarians, observation of their work at the reference desk, and review of their digital reference transcripts, or even more structured methods, such as Kelly's repertory grid technique, would be useful in surfacing reference librarians' personal theories of practice.

Study of reference librarians' personal theories could show developmental changes from novice to expert and relationships between what librarians think and what they actually do at the reference desk. Research may show the sources of reference librarians' personal theories and how and why these beliefs change and develop. This information could be used to improve professional education and professional development for librarians and to add new dimensions to models of reference service or generate new theory. Study of reference librarians' personal theories of practice could have much to contribute to the renaissance of reference services.

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