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Using the Tools of Crisis Intervention and Empowerment Counseling in the Reference Interview

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COMO WHITE PAPER

Serving sexual assault survivors in the academic library:

Using the tools of crisis intervention and empowerment counseling in the reference interview

by Wendy S. Wilmoth

Reference service is a cornerstone of library and information science. The reference interview, in particular, is essential to providing the best library service possible. The reference interview is the subject of books, articles and other works that attempt to define the elements of a successful transaction. Usually, these works are based on the idea of meeting the true needs of the library patron. Much has been written in the counseling field on working with victims of violent crime. This paper will explore similarities between reference service and the concepts of empowerment counseling, as defined by the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape, and crisis intervention, as defined by the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault, in the hope of enabling academic librarians to provide assistance that is informative and relevant to patrons who may be survivors of sexual assault.

Sexual assault survivors

For this paper, patrons who may be survivors of sexual assault (SA) will be designated with feminine pronouns because the majority of survivors are female. It is important to remember, however, that many survivors are male.¹ Friends and relatives of survivors are potentially in need of similar services, and they often are called "secondary victims."²

College-age women are at an elevated risk of sexual violence. Fisher, Cullen and Turner estimated that for every 1,000 women on a campus, approximately 35 incidents of rape happen each year.³ According to Tjaden and Thoennes, approximately 78 percent of all rape survivors experienced their first rape under the age of 25.⁴

Identifying SA survivors is a valid concern for librarians who may be serving them on a college campus. How do we tell who is or is not a sexual assault survivor? The simple answer is that we cannot. Many survivors are able to present a "calm" face to strangers and acquaintances in everyday life, and they come from all ethnic, socio-economic and family backgrounds.⁵ When presented with a question about sexual assault, a librarian should always assume that the patron might be a survivor or secondary victim.

The reference interview

Bopp defined the reference interview as "a conversation between a reference staff member and a user, the goal of which is to ascertain the user's information need and take appropriate action to satisfy that need through skillful use of available information sources."⁶ He recognized that the communication methods one uses in a reference interview are also used by other helping professionals.⁷ Reference librarians can employ the skills of the counseling profession to provide meaningful service to survivors of sexual assault. Several works discuss psychology-based interviewing techniques in the reference environment. Moody and Carter advocated the "cognitive interview" in which mnemonic strategies are employed to increase recall as a method to clarify a patron's needs.⁸ Eidson discussed the psychological concept of emotional intelligence, advocating the use of such competencies as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills to provide reference service to patrons who place a great deal of importance on the librarian's social skills.⁹ Peterson discussed the counseling model as an effective method for conducting

an interview.¹⁰ Dewdney and Michell discussed the implications of asking "why" questions of patrons.¹¹

Empowerment counseling

The concepts in this paper can be applied to survivors who are recent survivors of SA and those who are several years removed from the event but still suffering stress as a result. The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) defined empowerment counseling as "a process through which those who have been oppressed or victimized can learn to know their strengths and recognize themselves as the experts of their own lives, needs strengths, competency and dreams."¹² PCAR further defined the goals of empowerment counseling, which include providing sufficient information to survivors for them to make their own informed decisions, encouraging survivors to re-take control of their lives and decision-making power, providing assistance in obtaining the knowledge and learning the skills that rebuild self-confidence, and creating responsible social change.¹³

There are five questions that PCAR defined as central to empowerment counseling:

1. What would a good situation look like?
2. What would need to change?

3. What are the steps necessary to make the change?
4. What help would you need to take these steps?
5. Who could provide you with support as you take these steps?¹⁴

These five questions can be used as the centerpiece of a successful reference interview as well as a successful counseling intervention.

Empowerment counseling and the reference interview

PCAR's five questions of empowerment counseling can be very useful in the reference interview. The first question, asking for the definition of a good or right situation, may address what the patron expects to get out of the reference session. The obvious assumption is that the good or right situation would be having complete and accurate information to accomplish the intended task. A survivor, however, might be looking for something in addition to this, such as a sense of empowerment that comes from just having information about the issue and knowing that she is not alone. The second question, concerning desired changes, is also applicable to both the counseling situation and the reference interview. When a patron seeks reference service, it can be assumed that he or she is looking to change something. Changes may include making a research paper better, getting a better

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job, etc. A survivor, however, may be looking for an entirely different kind of change, such as getting away from an abusive situation, finding counseling to regain her mental health or finding support from fellow survivors. For this reason, the reference interview with a suspected survivor must be kept as confidential as possible. She might be extremely sensitive to even being seen in a library asking about options. A librarian who suspects that a patron is a survivor of sexual assault should make every effort to get that person into a private area for the reference interview.

The third question concerns the steps that are needed to reach the intended “good” situation. This is where the librarian’s research skills are essential. Someone who has been a victim of violence may have no idea what to do and may simply want to know, “What do I do now?” It is recommended that every library investigate services for survivors in the local area and keep a list of services and contact information near the desk, including national or state hotline numbers. The survivor may see the librarian as a kind, helpful professional and try to use them as a counselor. At this point, it is important to gently remind the patron that the librarian is not a counselor and cannot give advice on how to proceed but will be glad to help her look for information on all of the options.

The fourth question involves the kind of help that is needed in order to make the change. A librarian should be able to locate resources that discuss all of the options available. It is very important not to give the patron advice such as “you should go to the police,” but to make sure she has information about all of the options so that she can leave with the necessary tools to make an informed choice. It is a good idea to have some free materials such as pamphlets (a local crisis center may be able to provide these) that the patron can take with her. Free materials that do not need to be returned are an excellent resource for survivors who may have taken a great personal risk to come to the library.

The fifth question involves help and support. A survivor may be asking for help without actually voicing a question. It is a good idea for a librarian to give any patron who asks about sexual assault contact information for a helping resource, such as the number of a rape crisis hotline. Not only can these organizations assist survivors, they can also provide excellent information to researchers.

In empowerment counseling, the counselor is advised not to use questions that ask or imply “why.”¹⁵ Dewdney and Michell advised against excessive use of “why” questions in the reference interview. They explained that the librarian and patron may view a “why” question

differently. The librarian may be looking for a motivation for the patron’s query in order to give a more complete or relevant answer, but the patron may view the question as suspicious, intrusive or confusing. Dewdney and Michell further suggested that these feelings on the part of the patron may lead to hostility and a breakdown of the reference transaction.¹⁶ There is, however, an additional reason to avoid the use of “why” questions with survivors. When asking “why,” one is looking for a reason or motivation. If a reference librarian were to say “why are you looking for information on sexual assault counseling?” a survivor would be faced with two choices: reveal sensitive information or lie. No one should be forced into that dilemma by someone who purportedly is serving her. Additionally, a self-revelation might lead to questions about the abusive event or situation. When one asks a question like “why did he rape you?” the question implies that he must have had a reason, and this reason may be the responsibility of the victim. It is imperative that anyone in a service role, whether librarian, counselor or even friend, avoid “why” questions that may sound like victim blaming.

Crisis intervention

The Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA) defined crisis intervention as “immediate short-term support for sexual assault survivors to insure that physical, medical and psychological needs are met.” TAASA continued, “Most importantly, crisis intervention involves helping a person handle the current crisis effectively, by utilizing their own strengths and support systems.”¹⁷ Though this definition indicates that it is short-term, the skills that are involved in crisis intervention may be useful at any time in which a recent or long-past survivor is in a state of stress caused by memories of the assault. TAASA outlines nine steps for effective crisis intervention:

1. Establish Rapport
2. Active Listening
3. Define the Problem
4. Assess the Situation
5. Explore Options
6. Discuss Acceptable Alternatives
7. Referral
8. Closing
9. Follow-up¹⁸

These steps correspond closely to some of the steps recommended for conducting a reference interview.

The first step, establishing rapport, is intuitive. No successful transaction occurs when there is a lack of comfort and trust. Both librarians and crisis counselors should work hard to make that good first impression.

The most striking similarity is that regarding the concept of active listening. According to Bopp, "Active listening involves reflecting back to the user the librarian's understanding of the question to verify that it is being properly understood."¹⁹ TAASA advises a crisis counselor to "check out what you understand them to be saying to see if you are on the same wavelength."²⁰ Active listening can serve much the same purpose in both situations: clarifying the problem or question, making sure that it is being understood completely, rephrasing it to cast it in a different light and using this broadened understanding to form an action plan.

The third step recommended by TAASA is defining the problem. This is necessary in all reference interviews. Hoskisson stated that the first question asked seldom addresses the true need.²¹ Eidson recommended that librarians should be able to adjust to a question that changes as the conversation continues.²² In crisis counseling, defining the problem might involve isolating the survivor's true emotions and needs. In a reference interview, the patron's emotions might play a lesser role, but the patron's needs are still paramount.

The fourth step, assessing the situation, is crucial to conducting a successful interview. The librarian should take stock of the patron's appearance and behavior. Is she nervous or agitated? Are her questions clearly articulated or frantic? Such an assessment might help the librarian learn the immediacy of the patron's needs.

Exploring options is an effective way to help a survivor in her decision-making process. TAASA recommended avoiding advice and presenting all of the available options to the survivor.²³ A survivor who has options from which to choose is taking back power over her own life from the assailant who took it away. Librarians should be interested in giving complete information, including options for finding help, but a survivor might not be interested in all of the options. A librarian should understand that this does not mean that the interview has been unsuccessful.

TAASA stated that, if a referral is necessary, it is a good idea to give more than one.²⁴ If a patron is given several different sources of assistance, this increases the options and gives back a small part of that power over her life that an abuser took away. Nolan advised that an unsuccessful interview should be ended with a referral.²⁵ In the case of a possible survivor, even a successful interview should be ended with a referral. It may not be possible to recognize a survivor, so a referral to a rape crisis center "for more information" might be very useful for a survivor or even for a researcher. Many larger

campuses operate their own rape crisis services. Librarians should be aware of all campus resources.

TAASA stated that the closing of a crisis counseling encounter is ideally initiated by the survivor.²⁶ Nolan pointed out that a reference interview may be closed by either the reference librarian or the patron, or both simultaneously. He recommended that a librarian encourage the patron to come back for more help if necessary. It may appear that in this situation the librarian is closing the interview, but in actuality he or she is leaving it open to continue at a time of the patron's choosing.²⁷ TAASA also recommends that the crisis counselor let the survivor know that calling the hotline was the right thing to do and that it is the first step in the healing process.²⁸ Eidson recommended a similar approach, but at the beginning of the reference interview. He suggested affirming that the patron has come to the right place and the librarian is open, available and ready to help.²⁹ This approach is well-placed at either end of the interview with a survivor. At the beginning of the interview, it may encourage the survivor to relax and be more willing to ask questions openly, knowing that she will be heard and respected. At the end of the interview, such an approach may make the survivor feel comfortable returning to the library and working with its staff. It may also make her feel that if the librarian is kind, encouraging and affirming, there may be others who are the same way. This might encourage her to seek the assistance of counseling professionals.

TAASA defines follow-up as summarizing the encounter, encouraging the survivor to call the crisis center anytime and saying goodbye.³⁰ This leaves the decision of whether to have any more contact with the crisis counselor in the survivor's hands. Nolan takes much the same position. In a crisis intervention situation, it might be helpful to offer to call the survivor a few days later in order to offer additional help. A follow-up call, of course, should only be made with the survivor's permission. This is an excellent practice for librarians, too. A reference librarian may need to contact a patron to offer additional information found after the patron has left or for related purposes. If the patron is currently in an abusive relationship or does not want the people in her household to know that she has been assaulted, a call from a librarian may raise suspicions. If a patron does not give permission, it is best to wait for the patron to come back or call.

Online information sources for survivors

There are some excellent resources that a survivor can access from the privacy of her own computer. A good first stop is the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National

Network, or RAINN, at www.rainn.org. RAINN maintains an informative Web site and operates a 24-hour hotline that links callers with a nearby rape crisis center. For information about sexual assault in Georgia, a survivor can stop at the site of the Georgia Network to End Sexual Assault (www.gnesa.org). This site maintains a listing of all rape crisis centers in Georgia. Of course, it is also a good idea for reference librarians to acquaint themselves with materials in their libraries' collections that may be helpful for survivors.

Conclusion

Many academic libraries are known as places whose staff members are genuinely available and ready to help students. Recommended strategies for conducting the reference interview are similar to strategies that are recommended for assisting sexual assault survivors in crisis. Reference librarians should be able to recognize when a possible survivor asks a reference question and use strategies drawn from librarianship, empowerment counseling and crisis intervention to provide compassionate, helpful and confidential service to these patrons. PCAR listed social change as a goal of empowerment counseling.³¹ Positive social change will be accomplished if libraries are universally known as places where survivors can begin their healing process with the assistance of caring, knowledgeable staff. ▶▶

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