Scouting the Perimeters of Unobtrusive Study of Reference

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the origins of the unobtrusive method of evaluating reference service in libraries, setting the method in a theoretical and organizational context. Drawing examples from the more than sixty studies performed in the past twenty years, limitations and strengths of the unobtrusive methods are explored. It is concluded that the technique, perhaps the most rigorous method of evaluating reference service, is useful for its client-centered perspective and its non-reactivity. It deserves not only continued use but continued development as a method of evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

The unobtrusive method, a.k.a. “unobtrusive testing,” “hidden testing,” and “contrived observation” was applied to reference service for the first time by Terence Crowley in 1967 (Crowley & Childers, 1971). By now, most reference librarians in American public and academic libraries should have heard of it in one way or another. They may not have experienced it directly, either as subject or perpetrator, but they have probably encountered writings or discussion about it. From a recent online search and recent printed bibliographies, it might be estimated that over forty publications and semi-publications that report unobtrusive studies of reference service have been produced, in addition to uncounted others that discuss unobtrusive studies to one degree or another. The basic theme of the unobtrusive study of reference has always
been to (1) ask a library staff member a query, posing as a real client, and (2) judge the response. There have come to be several variations on the main theme, as will be pointed out below, but virtually all unobtrusive studies of reference service do this.

In the early days, the response was judged on the basis of its correctness and completeness. These criteria, sometimes blended into a single criterion of correctness-cum-completeness, have dominated the interest of researchers. Most studies have also observed the demeanor or behavior of the respondent in one way or another, and some have explored the personal reaction of the poser of the query.

The first true publication (not a thesis) reported two studies that were situated in public libraries (Crowley & Childers, 1971). Since then, unobtrusive studies of reference have been performed in academic libraries, the one is by Marcia J. Myers and Jassim M. Jirjees (1983) being the first two such; academic government document centers; law school depository libraries; and health sciences libraries (Hernon & McClure, 1982; Way, 1983; Paskoff, 1989).

From the first light of publication, both the method and the findings of unobtrusive study of reference attracted attention, and they seem to continue to do so. Not only is the method inherently sexy—a "cool medium," in Marshall McLuhan's old terminology, similar in its appeal to a television game show—but the findings have been sometimes as juicy and shocking to the professional psyche as the report of an ax murder or the more modestly thrilling columns of Dear Abby. With some divine inspiration from the first edition of Unobtrusive Measures (Webb et al., 1966) and led by his own passion to know if librarians were giving out correct information on current events, Crowley concocted a bombshell of a technique, as research techniques go.

Even in the early days, the technique was not unique to the library field. Eugene Webb's (1966) book, citing examples of unobtrusive study from many fields, testifies to the fact. Examples out of this author's own files include the titles "IRS Answers Tax Limits of Accuracy," "Information Provided by Police Over Phone Often is Found Wrong," and "Measuring City Agency Responsiveness: The Citizen-Surrogate Method" (Warden, 1969; Buder, 1979; International City Management Association, 1981). Studies of performance by Internal Revenue Service staff have become commonplace in recent years. Comparison shopping and consumer testing are unobtrusive techniques that are firmly rooted in the social landscape. And in June of 1990, the father of a victim of the bombing of an airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, passed a dummy bomb in his suitcase through a security checkpoint to test the preparedness of the airport security system (Fineman, 1990).

Even within librarianship, the technique is not unique to reference service. In their 1966 book, Webb and others included several examples
of unobtrusive study in libraries—but not the testing of reference quality. For example, the informativeness of hospital physicians was deduced from the number of books circulated on the topic of the patient’s illness, and the community impact of television was studied by reviewing the changes in library circulation patterns (Webb et al., 1966). Moreover, virtually all studies of library circulation are done unobtrusively, without the client’s knowing that his or her borrowing is being scrutinized. But it was the unobtrusive study of reference that brought the method to the fore.

THE PROMISE OF THE UNOBTRUSIVE METHOD

For a snapshot of the real world, one wants an unobtrusive camera. Known-testing situations generate unnatural reactions in those being tested. Thus, it is assumed that its subjects will behave abnormally and most often will try to behave abnormally better.

From the outset, the promise of the unobtrusive study of reference service was to provide a nonreactive study situation. To the extent that a respondent could be made to believe that a bona fide reference transaction was underway, the respondent would, by definition, not react to the testing. One could assume that the respondent was operating normally. This is the conceptual foundation of unobtrusive study.

The unobtrusive method promised to allow the evaluation of a service, a library or group of libraries, and individuals. It has, in fact, been so used. The method promised, too, to tell why there were less-than-perfect reference librarians or reference departments and how to fix them. The latter promises are still largely unfulfilled.

So Far, So What?

If one were to list the dominant results of the unobtrusive study of reference to date, a handful stand out:

• Depending on how the results were scored, the majority of the unobtrusive studies have concluded that the percentage of answers that are acceptable is in the area of 50 to 60 percent. This percentage may rise to as much as 75 percent when referrals to outside sources are counted as correct answers. For individual libraries or librarians, scores have ranged from 0 to 100 percent.

• Relatively few answers are wrong. The major failure of the reference system is in not attempting an answer—turning the query away for one reason or another (“The book is out in circulation,” “I’m sure we don’t answer that kind of query,” “I’m sorry, you must have dialed incorrectly—this is the library.”).
When studied, the demeanor of library reference staff has usually been found to be pleasant, but several studies have found that librarians did not engage in enough query negotiation to know what the underlying query is in many cases, or that they did not employ sufficient feedback mechanisms in the reference transaction.

STUDY VARIABLES

Unobtrusive studies began in order to evaluate the institution or the service from the perspective of the client. It was thus natural that the study focus on the product which the client received at the end of the service activity: the response to a reference query. That is to say, it was natural for the early studies to concentrate on the output of the reference transaction, inasmuch as the studies were client-centered.

Moreover, the bulk of the early studies were conducted by phone. This further emphasized the output focus of the method, inasmuch as the respondent's activity (the reference process) was unseen. Reference service was viewed mainly as a "black box" which, when stimulated with a query, triggered a largely unobservable process of some sort and eventually resulted in an observable response.

However, close on the heels of the first reports of unobtrusive studies, the profession showed interest in observing the process of the reference transaction unobtrusively because, naturally, reports of shocking levels of performance stimulated managers and reference librarians to seek the reasons. And the reasons, or determinants, of performance were thought to lurk in the reference process. The variables of the reference process, such as titles used in answering queries, were increasingly opened to scrutiny. To a large degree, the desire to observe the reference process has required face-to-face posing of queries, so that a proxy may observe more than just the final answer.

Moreover, other aspects of the reference transaction and product were gradually scrutinized through unobtrusive spectacles, expanding the view of reference.

The Dependent Variables

The aspects of reference service of first and greatest interest have been those of reference output: the reference product. The reference product and its aspects are the logical dependent variables of reference study. They depend on other things for their quantity and quality, on such independent variables as the people posing the queries, the people answering the queries, the collections used, the institution in which the answering occurs, and on various interpersonal aspects of the
reference process. Peter Hernon and Charles R. McClure (1987a) present a checklist of eighty-two dependent and independent variables, both simple and in combined form, for the reference function. Kenneth D. Crews (1988) has reviewed the variables that have been correlated with reference accuracy in obtrusive and unobtrusive studies.

The main dependent variables in unobtrusive studies have been, first, the accuracy of the response and second, its completeness. Some studies have used a composite variable that combines them, while others have used two separate variables of accuracy and completeness.

The most important area of expansion in unobtrusive study has been the dependent variables. Beyond accuracy and completeness, major dependent variables that have been used to date include:

- Was the query referred to a likely outside source, such as a government agency? A recent study at the Illinois State University Library by Lancaster, Nourie and Elzy (in these Proceedings) scores respondents on their referral to a source which might be expected to hold the answer.
- Was an appropriate referral made to an outside source that actually gave the correct answer? In a 1978 study, referred-to outside sources were asked the original test query, and the libraries were scored on the accuracy-cum-completeness of those responses (Childers, 1978).
- Was the query referred to a likely inside specialist? At Brigham Young University, a major interest in at least two unobtrusive reference studies was the extent to which paraprofessional and student assistant aides correctly referred queries to internal specialists (Christensen et al., 1989; Adams et al., 1989).
- Did the respondent handle a query on a sensitive subject with composure and apparent objectivity? The two most prominent such studies consisted of one query each applied to thirteen libraries: "Information for the construction of a small explosive device" (Hauptman, 1976, p. 626) and "I want to find out how to freebase cocaine" (Dowd, 1989, p. 486).
- Did the respondent handle proxies dressed to represent alternative cultures equitably (Kroll & Moren, 1977)?
- How willing is the inquirer to return to the same staff member with another query at another time? This approach to the dependent variable was developed by Joan C. Durrance (1989) as an alternative to the accuracy/completeness variable, in acknowledgement of the degree to which the total reference environment-setting and librarian behaviors—is embedded in the client’s valuation of reference “success.” Accuracy of answer (as perceived by the proxy) was in this case an independent variable. It was highly correlated with willingness-to-return, but was not the “single, crucial key to the success of the reference interview” (p. 35). This study is a breed apart.
It addresses success from the holistic and pragmatic vantage point of the client (in this case, a proxy) and that client’s personal assessment, rather than from the more explicit and more commonplace vantage point of the accuracy-cum-completeness criterion—a vantage point that is both more objective and idealistic. Hers is primarily a study of process rather than product quality and thus is very different from the mass of unobtrusive studies of reference. In light of warnings in the research literature of social science and of the well-documented halo effect that crowns library institutions, and despite the apparent care of the researcher in training the library school proxies to be critical of the reference process, it would be rash to equate the findings of this study of proxy perceptions with the findings of more abstract studies of the quality of the reference product—even though the “would return” figure was 63 percent, disconcertingly close to the findings in accuracy studies.

- In the summer of 1984, this author attempted an exploratory unobtrusive study of the total reference system at Memphis and Shelby County Public Library and Information Center. Using what might be called a qualitative and action-research approach, each member of a staff committee was assigned the task of recruiting a friend who was not a library client and having that friend approach the library with a query of personal interest, and record the whole experience. (For instance, one friend wanted a recipe for Mississippi mud cake. She walked into the library, went to the card catalog, and looked under “cake.” The transaction deteriorated from there, even with some limited intervention of library staff, and she left, confirmed never to try the library again.) The data of their friends’ experiences were not tabulated. Rather, the committee shared them, and the friends’ reports became the basis for understanding clients’ potential barriers to using the information system of the library.

The Independent Variables

From the first unobtrusive studies, researchers have tried to identify the things that predict or determine performance on the dependent variables. What factors lead to high or low performance and, by implication, what can be changed to improve performance? The determinants, or independent variables, are many and wide-ranging. They have been grouped below, showing illustrative individual variables:

- Library characteristics, including size of staff; size of various collections (general, reference, serials); budget; physical environment of the reference desk; ambiance of the reference area (such as degree of activity)
• Staff behaviors, including length of searching time; degree of negotiation of query; use of sources
• Staff demeanor, including friendliness; openness; approachability; interest in the questions; and professionalism
• Query characteristics, including subject area; difficulty; type (e.g., bibliographic, nonbibliographic); time of day or day of week
• Individual staff characteristics, including education or certification; time in grade; sex; age; individual staff member
• Client characteristics, including education; age; occupation or student status

Furthermore, unobtrusive studies have focused on different units of analysis for reference performance: individual staff members; the library organization; the department of the library; the query itself; and the query type.

BRINGING PAST STUDIES INTO FOCUS

Time has enriched the settings and variables studied. But what do the studies mean? How much of the reference story are they telling? Over the last several years there have been assertions and rebuttals about the scope of unobtrusive studies of reference, and there are issues that have yet to be debated.

The following pages will scout the perimeters of unobtrusive studies of reference, probing issues of scope and limitation. Some of the issues have been broached in the literature, and others are new. The purpose is to put unobtrusive studies of reference into a realistic perspective so as to know what can and cannot be claimed for them and to know what territories have yet to be explored.

The Nature of the Queries Studied

The way queries have been chosen for study has seriously compromised the validity of unobtrusive study in several ways. That is, the studies are not as representative of the real world because of limits that have been imposed on them.

First, some have claimed that the findings of unobtrusive reference studies indicate that the quality of reference work, generally, is little better than at the 50 percent level; others have claimed that the studies were so limited in scope that such broad claims about reference work in general were misleading. As this author (Childers, 1987) claimed in rebuttal to Hernon and McClure (1987b), the unobtrusive study of reference has emphasized one type of reference product to the virtual
exclusion of all others: the provision of the specific (not necessarily easy) answer to the short, factual, unambiguous query—the sfu. Bibliographic queries are often included in this type. This author estimated that one-eighth of all reference demands received at a public library reference desk are sfus (Childers, 1987). Diane M. Brown (1985) found by actual count that “short-answer/fill-in-the-blank” queries accounted for 54 percent of telephone queries in a public library. In her classic study, Caroline E. Heiber (1966) had found that 48 percent of walk-in queries were of this type. The sfu is not the only kind of reference service demanded; other services include end-client computation, online searches, community calendar, distribution of brochures, a community resource directory, preparation of lengthy bibliographies, bibliographic instruction, advice on search strategy, and advice on reading and learning.

From the first investigation, the sfu has been the natural kind of query to study, for it standardized the query so that all proxies could present it in roughly the same way; specified the query so that there would be little likelihood that the respondent would want to seek clarification of it (thus reducing extraneous variation in the transactions); and codified the acceptable response so as to reduce the ambiguity and inconsistency inherent in judging the goodness of response. But all of these efforts to improve the reliability of the unobtrusive instrument compromise its validity—the extent to which the queries or the transactional situation represent the real world. And most students of the unobtrusive method have wittingly or unwittingly accepted the compromise, and seem to have forgotten that they did so.

However, in at least two cases, some relatively ambiguous queries and nonspecific answers, such as “I’m looking for background information on Tolkien” and “I need as much material as I can get for a 10-page paper on participative management,” were incorporated in the study (Van House & Childers, 1984; Lancaster et al., these Proceedings).

Second, in many libraries, telephone intake is much less than half of all reference intake and it is not equatable with the walk-in where (a) a given transaction can be an intermittent series of transactions and (b) the range of valid response is wider (for example, enlist the client; instruct client; provide a mix of answer and guidance). Conducting a study wholly by telephone further compromises its validity in terms of representing the whole reference service program.

Third, in a number of studies, researchers have deliberately limited the test queries to ones that can be answered with the resources on hand in the library (for example, Lancaster et al., these Proceedings; Thompson, 1987). This has the effect of creating a test of the librarian’s
skills in using in-house resources, inasmuch as it artificially constrains the query pool. Limiting queries to those whose answering is possible creates a test of the librarian's ability within the current collection limits of the institution, rather than of the institution's capacity to respond to clients' queries, which range from the possible to the impossible.

Finally, when judging the accuracy and completeness of responses to *sfus*, it is necessary to establish explicit criteria for judging if one is to be consistent and keep subjectivity to a minimum. In designing the criteria, one must necessarily be arbitrary. The researcher must assume the role of a particular client and imagine a desired response that would seem natural. For example, in asking for the post office abbreviation for Alaska, does the hypothetical client require that the respondent say "capital A, capital K, no space, no punctuation," or will "a,k" be sufficient? In view of the arbitrariness of such criteria, it seems appropriate in the study of a sensitive topic, such as human performance, to be generous both in setting the criteria (that is, establish minimal criteria) and in judging the responses against them (that is, give them the benefit of the doubt). Both forms of generosity distort the view of reference as it might be viewed by the client.

**Nature of The Reference Product**

In many years of working with reference librarians, this author has been impressed by a marked lack of clarity in the policies governing reference services, especially those policies that define precisely what is to be delivered to the client. There is no reason to insist that all libraries deliver the same type and quality of reference service. But there is reason to believe that individual libraries cannot operate at optimum effectiveness or efficiency without heeding Peter Drucker's (1973, chap. 6) age-old call to define what business they are in.

Lacking a sharp and universally accepted definition of the reference business, one might look for clues in what is studied about reference service for an implicit definition. What is immediately clear as one views the many unobtrusive studies is that a variety of definitions of the reference product are operative.

In any one study of reference, it is possible to score performance in several ways—for example, penalizing for non-answers or not penalizing for non-answers; giving credit for referrals or not giving credit. The earliest study to do this was by this author (Crowley & Childers, 1971). Recently, the study at Illinois State University (Lancaster et al., these Proceedings) evaluated performance on both a fifteen-point and a three-point scale. The variable scoring was important in
permitting a variety of views of the objectives or desired products of reference service. It reflects the ambiguity in the business statement of most reference services.

Almost all unobtrusive studies of reference operate under the assumption that providing direct answers to clients' queries is a valid reference service. The direct answer is not necessarily viewed as the only reference service, as will be noted in the discussion below; but it does occur as a matter of course in the program of reference services. And it is often seen as the most valued reference service, if there is an array of levels of services.

Moreover, as noted above, there are various features of the answer that are assumed to constitute goodness of answer. In many cases, the accuracy of the answer and its completeness are often features that are scored. In some studies, the citing of a source is valued. Further, in the studies of answering performance, it is assumed that any of the studied libraries (branches) offers or should offer direct answers to clients' queries as a regular service. The small library outlet that has chosen to serve, say, as a popular materials center only, will fall outside a study of answering performance or will fail the test.

In a number of studies, direction within the library or instruction in the use of library resources has been accorded a positive score. The Illinois State University study accepted leading to an answering source, directing to an answering source, within-library referral, and instruction to be valid reference responses. At Brigham Young University, the appropriateness of referral—to in-library professionals, another floor or department, interlibrary loan, or outside the library—was studied, rather than the actual answer to the proxy's query.

A number of studies (for example, Childers, 1978; Lancaster et al., these Proceedings) have granted points to library performance scores for referring the client to a likely outside source, thus suggesting referral to a likely outside source as a valid reference response. To many reference librarians, referral without certainty is an abrogation of professional responsibility. In response, some studies have explored the quality of the answer received from the referred-to outside source and scored the library on the quality of that answer (Childers, 1978; Hernon & McClure, 1987a). Thus, they have affirmed referral to a correct outside source as a valid reference product.

In some studies, there has been an attempt to develop an explicit hierarchy of reference products. Following the James I. Wyer (1930) concept of "liberal," "moderate," and "conservative" continuum of service, these studies grant more points to liberal service (delivery of the answer per se) and decreasing points as the client is increasingly brought into the search process (e.g., instruction in using an index) or left with an uncertain outcome (referral to likely, but perhaps untested,
outside source). Two hierarchies of the reference product are presented here for comparison. Note that the points on the two scales are quite different, and that the differences are not explained by the mere fact that one study takes place in a public library and the other in an academic library. It means that the way in which reference service, or reference product, is conceived is substantially different in the two study sites.

Gers and Seward, 1985

Correct answer and source
Correct answer but no source
Source where answer can be found
Partial answer and source
Partial answer but no source
Internal directions, lead to correct answer
Internal directions, do not lead to correct answer
No answers, external directions
Incorrect answer
No answer, no directions

Lancaster et al., these Proceedings

Complete and correct answer
Led to single source which provided complete and correct answer
Led to several sources, one of which held answer
Directed to single source which provided complete and correct answer
Appropriate referral to specific person or source which would provide complete and correct answer
Provided with partial answer
Appropriate referral to the card catalog or another floor
Did not find answer or suggest an answer or source
Inappropriate referral to catalog, floor, source, or librarian
Inappropriate sources
Incorrect answer

The Method Itself

Over the years, just as the scope of unobtrusive studies has expanded and the criteria by which performance is judged have developed complexity, there have been three major developments that have enriched the unobtrusive method itself.

First, most unobtrusive studies of reference have been single efforts to describe the state of reference service (or a portion thereof). In contrast to these, there have been few true experimental studies. The latter have been conducted in the classical, though simple, experimental form of test-treatment-retest, wherein the service was studied, an intervention—
usually training—was applied to the service providers, and the service was retested to see if there had been any change. Hernon and McClure’s (1987a) study of documents and general reference departments is probably the most prominent example of the experimental approach, even though it showed no effect of the treatment (training). Situations will be found in which unobtrusive studies have been done more than once, over a period of time, but not in a formal experimental situation. An example is two studies at Brigham Young University (Christensen et al., 1989; Beck et al., 1989).

Second, the most significant variation in the technical elements of unobtrusive study revealed by the literature is found in the study of performance at the top level of the State of California’s reference referral hierarchy. A random sample of actual queries received by and answers delivered to the requesting library systems was distributed to a national panel of reference experts for their evaluation. The major advantage of this variation is that one is dealing with actual queries and a sample of the full range of queries received by the library, so distortion based on query selection does not occur. The main disadvantages are that one must assemble an expert panel; and that the judgment of answers, especially to ambiguous queries, may vary from person to person (Van House & Childers, 1984).

Third, a substantial contribution to the managerial aspects of unobtrusive study was made by Eleanor Jo Rodger and Jane Goodwin (1987). Three contiguous public library systems in the Washington, D. C. area used the staff of each system to study another system, round-robin fashion, demonstrating the value of cooperation and the economy achievable by not having to hire proxies.

**CONCLUSION**

The unobtrusive method itself was tested and proved itself in 1984, when Terry L. Weech and Herbert Goldhor published their findings of the first and only comparative study of obtrusive and unobtrusive evaluation of reference. Using identical queries applied obtrusively and unobtrusively to the best public libraries in Illinois, they found that there was a significant, albeit not large, difference in performance on the obtrusive compared with the unobtrusive studies, in the correct direction. To the immense relief of researchers who had invested in the unobtrusive approach, there were fewer correct responses to the unobtrusive queries. Important as this may seem to the continued use of the unobtrusive method, most studies to date preceded that publication. Before Weech and Goldhor, the method had operated on its own intuited validity.
As unobtrusive studies of reference have accumulated, the idea has settled in. The method is rarely labeled an affront to personal privacy, for it has been argued and seems to have been agreed upon that a paid service professional is a public being and thereby relinquishes some of his or her individual privacy. The method seems to be less frequently charged with being an instrument of autocracy, for it has been used wisely and humanely in enough libraries that it has proven its innate innocence. The charge of wasting the time of professionals by causing them to spend time on artificial queries seems to have lessened; could it be that the power (shock) of the findings justifies the time and cost of the method? Alvin M. Schrader (1984) has said that the technique has not become firmly ensconced in the library management “bag of tricks.” It has reached the age of majority and a certain level of respectability, however, if only by virtue of its stability and continued power to give the field new perspectives on itself.

Hernon and McClure (1987a) raise questions of the reliability, validity, and utility of the unobtrusive method of reference study. While they do not research the questions, they do propose a checklist of how to improve the quality of unobtrusive data in each of the three areas. However, despite real reservations about validity or reliability, many of which are raised in the paragraphs above, the method has shown that it can offer a healthful vantage point, a client-centered antidote to the institutional myopia that afflicts us all. In addition, the unobtrusive method offers what many—excepting, perhaps, Durrance (1989)—consider to be a more objective assessment than asking the client’s opinion. Witness one study where unobtrusive evaluation found the library’s performance on correctness to be 75 percent; yet proxy patrons were satisfied with the service they received in 90 percent and were ready to recommend the library to others 97 percent of those same instances (Hansel, 1987).

More subtly, designing an unobtrusive study may force a given library to state its reference business, declaring what is and what is not its reference product. The impression this author holds, based on personal involvement with a number of studies, is that the decision on how to score performance has been an *ad hoc* one. It has often been a decision prompted directly by the study’s requirement for such definition, rather a decision that preceded the study, as service policy would naturally precede the delivery and then evaluation of service. This is probably not the best condition under which to reflect on an organization’s business. Drucker would not approve.

The approach and results of the Durrance (1989) study, in the context of Patsy J. Hansel’s (1987) findings, above, further torments the question of what is the reference objective? Is it a set of good feelings about the process plus a certain level of client satisfaction? Is it a level of
effort expended by the answerer or institution? Is it some objective or abstract quality of the answer? Whose perspective is valued in making these judgments?

The dearth of experimental studies may say something about the use of the unobtrusive study of reference. It implies that it is used relatively little as a mechanism for ongoing review of program quality and subsequent adjustment. Otherwise, one would see reports of many more true experiments, or at least more follow-up studies. Does it also further imply that the method is sought more for its value as a catalyst in fomenting change, unfreezing behavior, and capturing the attention of staff—in short, as a strategic managerial and political strategy tool?

Few unobtrusive studies of a qualitative nature have been done. As has often been the case in this field, research has favored quantitative probabilistic studies, where the interest is in uncovering precise proportions of a phenomenon, such as the number of reference failures, or the statistical correlation of staff behavior to performance. This is useful when the dimensions to be explored are known and can be codified. But where the dimensions are unknown and complex, probing is needed, and qualitative study may be called for. A qualitative approach to unobtrusive study may teach more about nuances of the reference process, such as how a person’s body language is used in the transaction; or how he or she uses words in negotiating a query; or the nature of errors of interpretation. Hansel’s (1987) work and this author’s work in Memphis (Childers, 1984) (discussed earlier) both had substantial qualitative aspects.

The unobtrusive study of reference has had it limits; some past applications and reporting have been flawed. It continues to have innate appeal to many and, to some extent, demonstrable research value, for it offers a unique perspective on the products and services that libraries deliver. And it continues to develop. While some argue that the method is not worthwhile and should be abandoned, doing so would strip the field of one of its most rigorous techniques of self-examination. Now, when self-examination and attention to quality are critical as libraries compete with other information services, is not the time to abandon a method of such power. Now is the time to tune and expand it—to apply it to new types of reference queries; to try new dependent and independent variables; to explore new unobtrusive methods, such as diaries, logs, and expert panels; to undertake qualitative as well as quantitative inquiries; and to increase the number of truly experimental studies.
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