

# The Empathetic Researcher: Applying Research Methods from Anthropology to LIS

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## Abstract

I combined semi-structured interviews and structured video auto-ethnography in an exploratory study of rural librarians' support for cyberbullied teens. This study involved two stages: 1) librarian and teen participants engaged in individual interviews with me. Librarian questions focused on perceptions of librarian roles and support for teens, while teen questions focused on perceptions of cyberbullying and needed adult support; 2) each participant then recorded one video entry via a personal digital device (e.g. iPhone) in which they responded to provided prompts that included hypothetical scenarios that allowed participants to engage in self-reflection and self-examination. Relational theory supported interview and prompt question development. Throughout the study, I maintained a written auto-ethnography that allowed me to reflect upon interview and video prompt design; participant interactions; and capture self-reflections during data collection. This poster will present an instrumental case that reflects the data collection activities and early results to illustrate innovative LIS research.

**Keywords:** Qualitative research, video autoethnography, interview method, cyberbullying, communication studies

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## 1 Introduction

As the popularity of social media has grown since its introduction in 2002, instances of cyberbullying among young adults have also increased (boyd, 2009). Cyberbullying is "any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others" (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 278). While sharing many of the same characteristics as traditional, face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying is distinguished by its online location, perceived anonymity, and flexibility of roles (Bauman, 2010; Bowler, Mattern, & Knobel, 2014).

Along with these differences, the relative newness of cyberbullying, adults' lack of awareness of its severity, and adolescents' reluctance to inform adults about victimization presents challenges when determining how to best support cyberbullied young adults (Li, 2007; Mark & Ratliffe, 2011). Adults, including parents, teachers, clergy, and coaches, have many important roles in the daily lives of adolescents. However, while these adults often perform a supervisory role, librarians do not (Braun, Hartman, Hughes-Hassell, Kumasi, & Yoke, 2014). As highlighted by one teen during the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Summit, "Teens need more adults who are not 'in charge' of them" (Braun et al., 2014, p. 10). Librarians have unique relationships with youth that can be described as informal and relaxed. Unlike the parent-child or teacher-child dynamic, librarians have a more balanced power relationship with teens. Through this relaxed relationship, librarians are able to help cyberbullied or otherwise distressed youth in ways other adults may not. These opportunities have not been thoroughly examined or discussed within library and information studies (LIS) scholarly and practitioner literature.

### 1.1 Background on Cyberbullying

Young adults' use of social media has risen quickly (boyd, 2007). In 2006, 55% of young adults used social media compared with 81% in 2012 (Madden et al., 2013). As adolescents' engagement with social networking sites has grown, they are also providing more information about themselves while online. Through profiles, posts, and uploads, young adults are sharing photos, addresses, phone numbers, and school locations (Marwick et al., 2013). As a result of this openness, young adults leave themselves vulnerable to online harassment including cyberbullying. In a 2011 survey of online young adults, Lenhart, Madden, Smith, Purcell, Zickuhr, and Rainie found that 88% had observed mean or cruel behavior on social media. Fifteen percent of those surveyed reported being the focus of such behaviors (Lenhart et al., 2011). Although not every unkind post or message on social media becomes cyberbullying, these behaviors can quickly escalate and have serious repercussions. To cope with these experiences, young adults need the support of adults, families, friends, and communities

## 1.2 Background on Cyberbullying Support

The support of adults is critical in both prevention and intervention related to cyberbullying among young adults (Mason, 2008). In the literature, parents, grandparents, educators, school officials, and legislators have been highlighted as potential sources of support and advocates for victims of cyberbullying (boyd & Hargittai, 2013; Mason, 2008; Meredith, 2010). Because of the influence of family on “the development and prevention of antisocial and violent behavior”, the focus of research on the parental role in cyberbullying prevention and intervention is understandable (National Science Foundation, 2013, p. 5). Teachers are also a logical focus as sources of support and guidance. Because adolescents spend a considerable amount of time in school, teachers often take a lead role in educating youth about Internet safety, appropriate technology use, and personal online responsibility (eSchool Media, Inc., 2012). However, other adults within a young adult’s community, like librarians, also perform supportive roles on a daily basis (Braun et al., 2014).

## 1.3 Empathetic Services

In this study, the term “empathetic services” refers to structured activities carried out one-on-one or in groups and everyday unstructured interactions in which the role of the librarian is to provide empathy. Empathy within the context of the library has been sporadically investigated under different labels such as pastoral care, library as a safe space, socio-emotional support, and invisible services (Cesari, 2014; Jones & Delahanty, 2011; Morris, 2013; Shaper & Streatfield, 2012). The role of empathy in librarianship has been examined in the research of several LIS scholars in the United Kingdom, but rarely in North America (Birdi, Wilson, & Cocker, 2008; Birdi, Wilson, & Tso, 2009; Wilson & Birdi, 2008). Supporting the provision of empathy in the library is interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication refers to “the verbal and nonverbal interaction between two interdependent people” (DeVito, 2013, p. 4). Librarians engage in interpersonal communication during every day exchanges with patrons, such as when answering reference questions, conducting programming, and offering technical support.

## 2 Research Questions

This study integrates three perspectives: rural young adults, rural school librarians, and rural public librarians, especially as they pertain to empathetic services provided to cyberbullied young adults. This study focused on three populations, young adults, school librarians, and public librarians, in rural Southwest Georgia and addressed the following questions:

RQ1: What types of support have rural young adults received from rural librarians?

RQ2: What support do rural young adults want to receive from rural librarians?

RQ3: What types of support do rural librarians provide rural young adults?

RQ4: What support do rural librarians want to provide rural young adults?

RQ5: How can relational communication theory provide a framework for understanding empathetic services? This study focused on three populations, young adults, school librarians, and public librarians, in rural Southwest Georgia.

## 3 Methodology

I used semi-structured interviews and video auto-ethnographies to collect the data for this study. First, I interviewed seven librarians in individual semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes. Subsequently, I interviewed seven young adults in individual semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes. After the interview phase was completed, I asked both the librarian and the young adult participants to record one video auto-ethnography lasting approximately 5 to 10 minutes during their own time. School and public librarians were contacted through my existing personal and community social network; young adult participants were recruited through recommendations from these librarians, regional youth organization leaders, and church youth pastors.

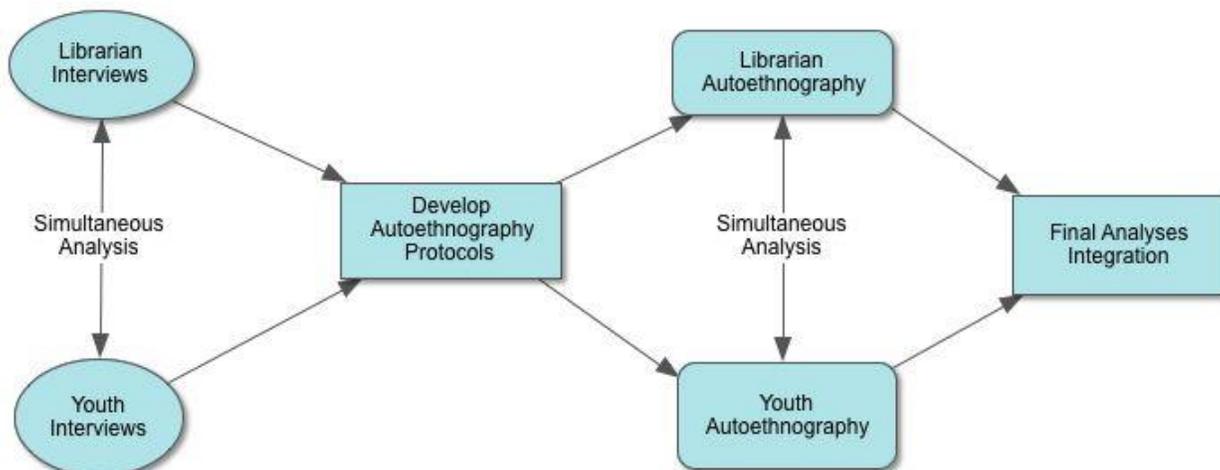


Figure 1. Data Collection Process

#### 4 Preliminary Findings

##### Analysis of Librarian Interview Transcripts:

- Category – librarian roles; librarians talked about balancing professional and emotional roles as librarian, developing professionally as a library leader, identifying what librarians “should” do and discussion of “traditional” librarian work
- Category – empathetic support; understanding teens, listening to teens, talking to teens, respecting teens, mentoring
- Category – relationships; talked about relationships with teens, teachers, school administrators, and parents
- Category – rural libraries – mainly came from public librarians dealing with issues regarding transportation, funding, poverty, and staffing

##### Analysis of Young Adult Interview Transcripts

- Category – classification; different aspects of cyberbullying, identifying drama, male/female differences in cyberbullying, cyberbullying roles
- Category – relationships; These were the important relationships in the daily life of a teen including friends, helpful adults, religion/church
- Category – dealing with cyberbullying/drama; range of coping mechanisms, differences in how male/females cope with cyberbullying/drama, ways to report cyberbullying
- Category – libraries and librarians; being a library user, interactions with librarians, librarians as supportive

##### Analysis of Librarian Video Autoethnography Transcripts

- Category – experiencing and/or witnessing cyberbullying; dealing/coping with cyberbullying, cyberbullying among adults, understanding and not understanding adult online behaviors
- Category – librarian roles; much of the same from librarian interviews, balancing professional and emotional roles, mandatory reporting, what librarians “should” do, “traditional” librarian work, advocating for teens
- Category – empathetic support; again, reflected in interviews with librarians, impact on teens, diminishing empathetic support, offering encouragement and reassurance
- Category – rural libraries: present mainly in the public librarians entries, dealing with challenges of rural librarianship

##### Analysis of Young Adult Video Autoethnography Transcripts

- Category – experiencing/witnessing cyberbullying; discussed drama, provided labels for cyberbullying and drama, online harassment, aggression, attempted to explain the behaviors of cyberbullied

- Category – empathetic support; supported the three other categories, seeking support from friends, school/church/peer groups, and adult
- Majority of video entries focused on these two categories:
- Category – reporting cyberbullying;
- Category – dealing/coping with cyberbullying and drama – advice on when to report, how to select someone to report to, who to report to, reasons for why victims may not choose to report cyberbullying

## 5 Preliminary Conclusions

School and public librarians provide a variety of services to their young adult patrons. This small, exploratory project examined the provided and wanted library services from the perspective of rural young adults and the provided and wanted library services from the perspective of rural school and public librarians. The provision of these services are supported by empathetic services, the structured activities carried out one-on-one or in groups and everyday unstructured interactions in which the role of the librarian is to provide empathy. Relational communication theory offers one framework for understanding how empathy in the library assists in the informational, educational, social, emotional, and psychological support librarians offer youth. This project is an early investigation into concept of empathetic services and its role in librarian support of young adults.

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