Letters

To the Editor:

Recent articles such as those by Whitlatch[1] and Douglas[2] have discussed the use and appropriateness of unobtrusive testing of reference services. Unobtrusive testing, like any other methodology, merits rigorous review and assessment. The purpose is to better understand situations in which a particular methodology is *most* appropriate, while at the same time identifying and addressing, where possible, methodological weaknesses. Unfortunately, misconceptions about, and incorrect attributions to, unobtrusive research persist.

Unobtrusive testing is only one of many possible research/evaluation methodologies. Articles suggesting that unobtrusive testing is an inferior technique for evaluating "reference services" distort the research record. First, unobtrusive testing only examines specific aspects of reference service. Although data resulting from unobtrusive testing can provide useful diagnostic information regarding a range of other reference service activities, the method focuses attention on reference staff responses to factual and bibliographic questions.

Second, Murfin and Gugelchuk[3] and Benham and Powell,[4] among others, have used other methodologies to assess staff responses to reference questions. The findings of these studies have supported those resulting from unobtrusive research.

Studies that apply unobtrusive testing or any other methodology must incorporate standard research practices. The Hernon and McClure study[5] as well as the work of Crowley and Childers[6] provide specific information about the criteria guiding the development of test questions and about the steps taken to ensure the collection and analysis of *quality* (reliable and valid) data. These reliability and validity controls were carefully implemented and reported in the studies. In fact, Hernon and McClure summarizes these methodological refinements.[7]

In contrast, the Douglas study provides no information about the reliability and validity of the data he reports. Similarly, Whitlatch gives no information on the reliability and validity of her obtrusive data. Rather, the reader must assume that there is reliability and that the research design permits the drawing of conclusive and widely generalizable findings. Whitlatch's discussion of content validity misses the point. Obviously, factual and bibliographic reference questions do not represent all reference questions received at the reference desk. It might be noted that content validity can be viewed from other perspectives.

An informed discussion and assessment of unobtrusive testing necessitates careful attention to methodological issues and questions centering around reliability, validity, and (perhaps) utility of the data and findings. Neither Douglas nor Whitlatch referred to the article "Quality of Data Issues in Unobtrusive Testing of Library Reference Service" by Hernon and McClure. In fact, that article discusses a number of their concerns. Thus, recent criticism of unobtrusive methods and quality of data issues tends to be simplistic and repetitive and ignores existing research on the topics.

Additional examples of misunderstandings about, and incorrect representations of, unobtrusive research dot the literature. And, despite some problems, Whitlatch's piece is a

good example of exploring some of these issues in a constructive manner. However, contrary to her assertion, the literature *already* contains examples of constructive uses of unobtrusive testing in specific libraries, for example, Stephan and others[8] and Williams and Wedig.[9]

The key issues with unobtrusive testing are to (1) advance knowledge and the discourse regarding the evaluation of various types of reference services, (2) increase the profession's awareness of evaluation overall and within specific library organizations, and (3) develop strategies for improving the quality of reference services.

Our experience suggests that while there is much discussion about the evaluation of reference services, *actual* formal evaluation (regardless of type of evaluation), overall, occurs much less frequently. Thus, we are pleased that unobtrusive testing has increased professional attention on issues related to the quality of reference service, "correct answer fill rates," and techniques for assessing the quality of various aspects of reference services.

Such discussions, however, are better served when the participants are fully informed on the issues; when they carefully craft their studies to address specific research questions, especially if they attempt to prove/disprove a particular hypothesis; and when they describe indicators of reliability and validity for the data they report.

PETER HERNON, Simmons College
CHARLES R. McCLURE, Syracuse University

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