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Commentary

Finding Out Is Better: Becoming a Librarian-Researcher

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"Supposing is good, but finding out is better." – Mark Twain

I became a librarian because I love research. Specifically, I love the process of finding things out. It almost doesn't matter what—if I have a sense that the answer is there to be found, I want to dive in and find it, as many of us do. As a reference librarian at heart, it matters to me that the result of a search will be of benefit to some or many people, but still, beyond that, I find the process intrinsically satisfying.

I entered librarianship with a background in population studies and public health research. As I gained experience as a librarian, I began to engage professionally in various ways, including doing research. This paper outlines my process in becoming, and embracing my identity as, a librarian-researcher. It also offers possibilities for how all of us who work in libraries can take steps to incorporate this important focus into our work.

My Research Background

I date the beginning of my research career to the moment that I began a life-changing course at the University of Pennsylvania called "Introduction to Demography." It would probably not be life-changing for anyone else, but it was wholly unexpected for me to be so intrigued by a subject. Demography was,

and still is, the academic subject about which I am most passionate, and which I find the most fascinating. I still revere the professor who taught it and was galvanized by the experience into leaving my career counseling job at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, to start my PhD in Sociology/Demography at the University of Washington in Seattle. It took me seven years to get that PhD, a normal timespan, during which I was a research assistant on three different projects, worked with some 15 data sets using four different statistical tools/packages, and took eight courses consisting solely of research methodology (most of which I don't remember now).

I discovered the reference librarianship aspect of my research life during the ten years that I was a public health epidemiologist for a local city-county health department after getting my PhD. I worked with an even wider range of datasets, analyzed and reported on public health data in a range of venues, and answered data requests from government agencies, researchers, students, the media and the public. Finding health-related information for people was so rewarding that I decided to make reference-related work a central career focus and went back for my master's degree in library and information science (MLIS). Yet, even after having written a dissertation, a book, several papers, and multiple public health reports, and with all my considerable training, I would not have called myself a researcher at the time I started my MLIS degree.

Librarianship was a revelation. I became serious about pursuing it after two wonderful librarians gave me the "librarian test" and I passed ("After you see a movie, do you run right home to research what it was about?" "Of course, doesn't everyone?"). While I was thrilled to have finally found the right career, I felt I was moving further away from the research world as I conceived of it. My main research-related concern during my MLIS program was getting the research methods course waived. I wasn't seeing librarians as researchers then because my viewpoint was so narrow and narrow-minded, but I see now that the very thing that attracted me to librarianship was the possibility of finding answers using sophisticated strategies and tools, carried out using rigorous processes. Librarians were doing this every day in varied settings, similarly to epidemiologists, and academics, whether in the context of answering a reference question from a patron, or of setting out to understand a professional phenomenon in their own worlds.

Embracing My Identity as a Librarian-Researcher

In my first job as a librarian, in a medical setting, after about a year of orienting to my new professional culture, I started to think about my professional path. I was amazed at how different librarianship was than public health and demography had been, in terms of what could be presented at conferences and what was being published. It seemed comparatively open and accessible. Giving a professional presentation no longer meant facing a terrifying gauntlet of methodological criticisms and competitiveness. In librarianship, intellectual curiosity, creative investigative methods, and precision in communicating content were there, but often with the crucial aspect of having a goal of improving services and processes in order to serve constituencies. The content of the research products from librarians felt varied, and immediately applicable to my questions and concerns. For example, I liked that the many available examples of case studies had an investigative quality that allowed them to be embraced as an initial step toward enhanced practice.

Soon I started reading and following the library journal from the University of Alberta, *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*. It dovetailed perfectly with teaching evidence based practice to clinicians as a medical librarian, and I have carried its viewpoint and lessons with me in my subsequent career. This journal also gave me one of the best learning experiences in critical appraisal of research that I have had

in any of my careers, that of writing evidence summaries (short evaluative pieces about library research papers).

Until this point, I had been defining research through a narrow lens of quantitative and science-based inquiry (with some judgmental tendencies remaining from my earlier studies), but now I was able to broaden my perspective. Over time I came to believe that research is defined as the process of investigating a question, involving systematically and rigorously gathering and analyzing information to answer it. Although there are disagreements about appropriate methods for arriving at the answer, the methods are merely a tool, while answering the research question is the central concern.

Through this shift in perspective, I began to consider myself a researcher, defined in a new way for me. I had many professionally-related questions and worked to answer them, as I saw others doing. I researched and communicated my findings to library communities. People were interested in my findings. I was still able to participate in these avenues in my new position as a public librarian, researching and creating a conference poster on the question of best practices for working with health consumers' numeracy issues.

By the time I had my first academic librarian job, an outreach position at the University of Washington, I had finally embraced my identity as a librarian-researcher. I was answering questions I had about how things worked, using rigorous processes. I was creating new content to advance practice, and I was engaging professionally with my field in more rewarding ways than I ever had. I was no longer conducting much quantitative analysis, but that no longer felt central to me as a marker of worth of the research or the researcher.

However, for my own story, there is another chapter, which has led to my writing this paper. In 2019, I went to the University of California, Berkeley. It was my first academic library liaison position, after almost 15 years as a librarian with a PhD. I was and am the liaison to the sociology and demography departments, and I consider this the perfect job for me. I could feel the rehydration of my desiccated connections to sociology and demography as disciplines. I re-read the classic textbook, Shryock and Siegel's *The Methods and Materials of Demography*, with nostalgia and joy. I read my faculty members' research profiles with deep interest, and, surprisingly to me, understanding. I felt solidly placed in academia writ large, and while it was not required, it seemed more natural that in this setting I might engage in what I thought of as Research with a capital R. I felt I should once again do research conducted in the way I had learned as a demography graduate student 20+ years earlier, the kind a demography faculty member would recognize and respect. I took a Coursera course in R (the statistical computing language) to get ready.

As it turned out, I didn't need statistical training; I needed the open-mindedness and time to learn new research methodologies. The two new research projects I engaged with were both qualitative rather than quantitative studies. One was an Ithaka S+R sponsored study examining big data research practices on campuses nationwide. The other was a team project on factors affecting the morale of library staff (as opposed to that of librarians), for which I obtained Principal Investigator status, applied for funding and human subjects research approval, arranged for a qualitative data analysis software tool license, negotiated bureaucracies to hire, pay, and supervise a transcriptionist, shepherded the project, and more. We learned qualitative methods from our experienced team member, and we interviewed, transcribed, coded, analyzed, and presented. We found the information to be so rich that we created four separate topics, one for each of us to pursue.

It was when I was analyzing and writing up the results from my topic area—the role of management in staff morale—that I started to connect with how much my earlier graduate study could inform even my qualitative research work. I had disconnected the two until this point, but now I realized that the depth and experience in research that I brought, even though it was two decades old, was helpful. I did an extensive literature review (more than 90 articles) and created detailed charts of the demographics of our respondents and their institutions and comparing them to published data. Furthermore, after reading about the depth and complexity of grounded theory methodology in qualitative research, I worked to incorporate a theoretical model into my approach. A number of the papers I reviewed drew from grounded theory methodology but didn't actually use the methodology in its intended form to create a theory arising from the data gathered. I saw this as a loss, since it would have been really interesting to see the more complete realization and visualization of their theoretical approaches. The resulting paper, "'Viewed as Equals': The Impacts of Library Organizational Cultures and Management on Library Staff Morale" (Glusker et al., 2022), was—and will remain—the one in my librarian career in which I used my background as a social science researcher the most. In particular, until this point I hadn't connected theory and theoretical models to my research as a librarian, and I hadn't sought out the appropriate research methods for my questions. Getting back into the processes of original research, including human subjects review and grant applications, was a trigger for me to revisit those and other practices I had learned earlier, while of course I should have been doing them all along.

As I reflected on this experience, I felt that my social science research background provided me with strong preparation for the process I eventually enacted, but it was not entirely necessary to the success of the project. There is a large and strong body of practice-focused literature by librarian-researchers, and I see amazing research, more in-depth and creative than this, and more technically adept, in the library science literature every day. At the same time, when reviewing the literature for the paper, I saw instances in which I felt that more quantitative research training might make librarian researchers feel the same deep satisfaction I do in extracting hidden patterns and trends from quantitative data, and also that qualitative research training would improve the quality and rigor of many library science studies.

Incorporating a Research Focus

If we define research as the process of investigating a question through methodically gathering and analyzing information to answer it, then in the end, how does one become a librarian-researcher? My outline of my own experience raises more questions than it answers. Perhaps we are all researchers already if we say that there is a continuum along which librarians lie, in considering themselves and striving to be researchers, rather than some dividing line between researcher and non-researcher. We could posit that we are all researchers because finding things out is our core value. Even more existentially, we can consider what being a librarian-researcher means to each of us, professionally and personally. I believe that if there is the good fortune to have workplace support and bandwidth, any librarian in almost any setting can be a researcher. The avenues for promoting, and interest in consuming, a range of research products are there.

My hope is that we explicitly incorporate research into our professional identities, and that we don't let others define or narrow that meaning for us. This can be challenging when our self-identities as librarians and researchers may be at odds with what is needed and rewarded in our workplaces. For example, in academia, librarians may find their research identities being shaped by faculty standards and the need to get tenure; in medical settings librarians may have to put research last since it is not considered a central function in terms of library services, and is not counted in performance reviews; and in public libraries, librarians may be told that research is "not what public librarians do." In addition, even if there is

support for research, it can be challenging to carve out time for an activity that may not be seen as "core". The best-case scenario would be, because library administrators value informed decision-making, that developing and answering research questions becomes (or perhaps already is) a standard procedure for improving services to users. Either way, I hope we can find ways to be scholar-researchers, practitioner-researchers, and reference-researchers in whatever ways that fit for us and are possible in the settings in which we find ourselves. Sociologist Andrew Abbott (1998) notes: "Librarians… are used to relearning their jobs every decade or so, and that is in fact the paradigmatic experience in most professions" (p. 442). If our self-identity as librarians can be dynamic, our self-identity as researchers can be as well. I have worked as an academic, medical, and public librarian, and I know how impossible this sounds—but I also know it is possible.

Part of this is acknowledging and promoting the research-related activities we are already involved in as part of our librarian identities. As with data literacy, where librarians may feel they are not "data people" but actually are already doing detailed and important data-related work, many of us are already research-involved in some way. We can recognize and appreciate what we already do—looking at circulation patterns, reading research-related articles, attending conference presentations in which research is presented, doing patron evaluation surveys at the end of our programs. If these spark more in-depth original research, that's wonderful, and if they spark nothing, and we are not drawn to formal research at all, that's also fine and we are in good company.

For those of us who are drawn to research, there is always more to learn about it. Most research-related papers end with some ideas for future research, which can be rich troves of questions to be explored in a variety of creative ways. Even if we feel that we have a good background in research, there is always the latest new thing to discover; for example, reading a paper on librarian-researchers and their networks (Kennedy et al., 2020) has inspired me to take a course in social network analysis. I'd also encourage us all not to fear quantitative analysis. It may seem daunting to see a spreadsheet with incomprehensible variable names and thousands of rows, but perhaps there is a thrill in extracting patterns and new information for the first time, and it doesn't have to take years to learn how to do it. Easy and accessible online tools such as DataBasic (databasic.io), RawGraphs (rawgraphs.io), and DataWrapper (datawrapper.de) mean that anyone can take a spreadsheet of interest, upload it, and immediately see percentages and visualizations that both answer and raise more questions. I also encourage us to respect qualitative analysis done well; it is a process which requires intensive effort and rigor and is far from the easy way out some perceive it to be.

Especially these days, it is becoming easier and less expensive to pursue research and methods training, and I am often asked how much and what kind of training is needed to perform research. I would never suggest that anyone suffers through research training in which they aren't interested. If someone feels drawn to researching their professional questions, there are many ways to produce the answers. I feel sad when I see librarians in a grim forced march toward finishing a research project they feel is needed for their professional status; I think to myself, "if only the research process could be intrinsically rewarding to them!" I don't think there is any set answer to this question—my thought is that it depends on setting and individual proclivities. However, some starting places might be to look at the literature and explore what types of research and research methods appeal, to find a research team on which to participate and learn, to take some basic methods workshops with hands-on components to see what feels doable, and to begin to research and present on processes and topics which are manageable in scope and close to hand. We should all recognize that it takes time and practice to feel more confident in taking on large projects and methodologies, and most often large projects involve a team approach, meaning that the research methods expertise may sit with other team members, but all contribute.

Last but not least, I'd like to see more librarian research follow the tenets of the evidence based practice movement. I've already mentioned the journal *Evidence Based Library & Information Practice*, and I'd like to also recommend a handbook for being evidence based as a librarian, *Being Evidence Based in Library and Information Practice*. It "brings together recent theory, research and case studies from practice environments across the broad field of librarianship to illustrate how librarians can incorporate the principles of evidence-based library and information practice (EBLIP) into their work" (Koufogiannakis & Brettle, 2016, p. 3). Being researchers can enhance our own practice, along with helping others. If we conduct ourselves and our work lives with evidence at the core, we take control of our identities as librarians and librarian-researchers, whatever that means to each of us.

This is all because supposing is good, but finding out is better.

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