

# Others-Oriented Reference: Employing Cultural Humility in the Reference Interview

**Grace Andrews**  
Wesley Biblical Seminary

**Bethany Radcliffe**  
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

**Garrett Trott**  
Corban University

## Abstract

Cultural humility has become a popular phrase in many contexts. Despite its popularity, cultural humility retains some ambiguity, particularly for professional application. This essay aims to resolve some of that by providing a brief overview of the term and specifically aiming to define cultural humility in the context of Library and Information Science. After providing a definition, this essay aims to assess a foundational component of librarianship, the reference interview, through this refined lens of cultural humility. The essay progresses to provide two examples showing how cultural humility can enrich reference services: referrals and relational integration. The authors of this essay argue that cultural humility may play a critical role in reviving the reference interview.

*Keywords:* cultural humility, reference interview, cultural competence, referral, relational reference

---

GRACE ANDREWS is the Director of Library Services at Wesley Biblical Seminary, where she enjoys connecting students to the right resources and challenging them to think critically and biblically about what they read and hear. She can be reached at [gandrews@wbs.edu](mailto:gandrews@wbs.edu).

BETHANY RADCLIFFE is an adjunct at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign where she teaches a class entitled "Reference and Information Services." She is passionate about all things reference, information literacy, and marketing, as they pertain to libraries. She can be contacted via e-mail at [bethanyr@illinois.edu](mailto:bethanyr@illinois.edu).

GARRETT TROTT is University Librarian at Corban University. He enjoys research, writing, and learning. He can be reached at [gtrott@corban.edu](mailto:gtrott@corban.edu).

The reference interview has historically been a key dynamic of librarianship (Brown, 2008, p. 6; Jennerich & Jennerich, 1997; Katz, 2002, p. 131; Kern, 2015, p. 61). In spite of this, some data suggest that the number of reference inquiries is decreasing (Kern, 2015, p. 63). Subsequently, their key role in librarianship has also come into question. As the culture of many service areas becomes increasingly diverse, perhaps librarians need to implement some aspects of cultural humility to revive the reference interview. This essay begins with an overview of cultural humility and provides a definition. In the subsequent parts of this essay, it provides suggestions regarding how one can apply the concept of cultural humility to a reference interview. This essay argues that applying cultural humility to a reference interview can strengthen the interaction and may play a role in reviving the reference interview.

## **Literature Review**

Cultural humility has become an intriguing concept in the early 21st century. The concept has roots in the healthcare profession, where it counters cultural competence (Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2008). In the context of the medical profession, cultural competency “assumes that healthcare providers can learn a quantifiable set of attitudes and communication skills that will allow them to work effectively within the cultural context of the patients they come across” (Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2008, p. 102). Some have suggested, however, that the phrase “cultural competency” suggests that individuals can reach an ability to function effectively with various cultures and have no need of further development (Hurley et al., 2019, p. 546). Subsequently, some have argued that the idea of cultural competency does not promote a culture of continual self-reflection and self-critique leading to lifelong development in areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998, p. 118).

These concerns led to the development of cultural humility. While some suggest that the difference between cultural competency and cultural humility is simply semantic (Corey, 2021), the authors of this essay, while not necessarily rejecting Corey’s premise, believe that the posture of humility is a primary distinction distinguishing competency from humility. Humility implies “a willingness to see the self accurately rather than the absolute attainment of accuracy” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 464). The authors of this essay are in agreement with Peterson and Seligman (2004) when they state that cultural humility generates a mannerism where “accuracy is secondary to whether a person is willing and able to weigh information in a nondefensive way” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 464).

Cultural humility is a process which embraces humility, specifically enabling a strong working alliance to develop between individuals who differ in any one of numerous respects: age, race, gender, religious background, etc... (Hook et al., 2014, p. 361). Humility also empowers personal reflection on how culture impacts one's perception of life (Hook & Watkins, 2015, p. 661). For example, Garrett grew up in a context where religion played a large role in his identity. Generally, Garrett had very good experiences in his religious journey. Subsequently, religious contexts are the norm for Garrett. While Garrett had a handful of negative experiences in religious contexts, the good far outweighs the bad. By embracing cultural humility, Garrett acknowledges that these experiences, while not necessarily bad in and of themselves, impact how Garrett sees religion. A stance of cultural humility in this context makes Garrett acknowledge that he is using his experience as an interpretive lens through which he views religion and many aspects of life. Likewise, cultural humility makes Garrett acknowledge that not everyone has the same interpretive lens and that his interpretive lens can use correction. In this context, cultural humility does not simply stop with this acknowledgement. Cultural humility forces Garrett to both acknowledge his experience as an interpretive lens, but secondly to understand that his interpretive lens is flawed and subsequently, it can use refining, which spurs action. One way (of many) that this refinement can come is by learning from someone who had similar experiences but saw them through a different lens (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998, p. 118).

With this idea of cultural humility in place, there are a handful of works that have aimed to address how one can apply cultural humility to Library and Information Science. This introduction will provide a brief overview of these works prior to developing how reference services can display cultural humility.

In their article, Andrews, Kim, and Watanabe (2018), describe how the Seattle Public Library provided free after-school tutoring programs to K12 students. The individuals offering tutoring services were volunteers. While Seattle Public Library aimed to have volunteers serve in their own neighborhoods, Andrews, Kim, and Watanabe (2018) soon realized that this would not work in all scenarios as some neighborhoods were able to generate more volunteers than others (p. 20). Andrews, Kim and Watanabe (2018) implemented a training session for all volunteers. Because of the diversity represented in the K12 students who would be served, the communities being served, and the volunteers, Andrews, Kim, and Watanabe (2018) utilized a framework of cultural humility in their training (p. 20). Andrews, Kim, and Watanabe (2018) argue that cultural humility provided a context where volunteers could devote themselves to life-long learning and holding themselves accountable in thinking "how their background, beliefs, and behavior might impact those they are teaching" (p. 20). The evaluation of this workshop

showed that instruction on cultural humility provided tutors with an excellent framework for classroom and tutoring interactions (Andrews, Kim, and Watanabe, 2018, p. 21). This small study suggested that an individual's understanding and practice of cultural humility can have a positive impact on person-to-person interactions, such as a reference interview.

In another article, Hodge (2019) argues that to provide the best library services, librarians must start by knowing and assessing themselves. Cultural humility, according to Hodge (2019), is an acknowledgment that librarians not only have biases, but countering these biases involves the work of identifying them and “actively working to reduce [their] biased responses” (p. 270). Hodge (2019) suggests that cultural humility “is a way of life instead of a check box. It is knowing that you need to meet people where they are because everyone is starting at different places” (p. 273). Hodge's (2019) study suggests that for librarians to truly serve patrons, librarians must strive to understand the services needed. Cultural humility plays a critical role in doing so because it enables the librarian to be aware of their own weak points, encouraging equity and subsequently discouraging a tendency to approach a patron as less than themselves. While simply said, this principle can be difficult to implement. However, when implemented appropriately, this essay argues that it has the potential to empower the dynamics of a reference interview.

In their article, Hurley et al. (2019) aim to provide a broad application of cultural humility to librarianship. They suggest that “[c]ultural humility involves the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other oriented in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the other person, the ability to recognize the context in which the interactions occur, and a commitment to redress power imbalances and other structural issues to benefit all parties” (Hurley et al., 2019, p. 549). Hurley et al. (2019) make some key points with this definition. First, they note that cultural humility involves certain dimensions (p. 549). In stating this, Hurley et al. (2019) suggest that this definition does not exhaustively define cultural humility, it specifically highlights its differentiation from other models (p. 549).

In their definition, Hurley et al. (2019) also state their uncertainty regarding if cultural humility could apply at an institutional level (p. 549). Subsequently, they refine their exploration in this article “to an individual's approach when interacting with other people” (Hurley et al, 2019, p. 549).

Hurley et al. (2019) also note that “practicing cultural humility is an ongoing effort, not a skill set to be acquired or knowledge to be mastered” (p. 549). In other words, cultural humility must be part of a lifelong learning endeavor in order to see fruition. This is a notable point, often neglected in other discussions.

The next point which Hurley et al. (2019) develop in their definition is a critical fruition of humility: being others-oriented. Others-orientation involves being aware of “aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the other person” (Hurley et al, 2019, p. 549). This others-orientation can enable librarians to be comfortable with the unknown, not knowing exactly how to respond to a patron’s inquiries with a willingness to acknowledge and be comfortable with what they do not know.

Hurley et al. (2019) continue in elaborating on their definition stating that a key component to cultural humility is recognizing the critical role context plays in our interactions. Again, this is a notable observation and one can do nothing but agree with Hurley et al.’s (2019) point that context is critical. The fact that many (not all) library services take place in a physical library building (where librarians often feel comfortable, but patrons may not) may speak somewhat to the need for humility development in the LIS profession. Likewise, the continual efforts to bring library services outside of the walls of a library may be a key dynamic of putting cultural humility into action.

The final component of Hurley et al.’s (2019) definition is: “a commitment to redress power imbalances” (p. 549). The root of cultural humility, as noted previously, was the health profession, “where power imbalances are inherent to the physician-patient relationship” (Hurley et. al., 2019, p. 550). These power imbalances, if left unaddressed, result in less-than-optimal care for patients. In a similar manner Hurley et al. (2019) argue that library services cannot be effective with the influence of power imbalances (p. 550).

With this definition, Hurley et al. (2019) argue that cultural humility may be well suited for librarianship because of the service-oriented nature of the profession and the barriers to service often created by cultural dynamics and a subsequent lack of understanding. Humility, specifically, cultural humility, Hurley et al. (2019) argue, creates a context where library services can flourish (p. 546).

While some authors note distinctions between cultural humility and cultural competency (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998), there are some contexts where discussion of the latter can assist in developing an understanding of cultural humility in the context of librarianship. One example of this is Mestre’s (2010) work. Mestre (2010) argues that while cultural competency often refers to “an ability to understand the needs of diverse populations and to interact effectively with people from different cultures” (p. 479), cultural competency must extend further, specifically to develop a posture that is ready to learn as cultures continue to develop (p. 479).

Montiel-Overall et al. (2016) further develop the concept of cultural competence and

how it applies to Library and Information Science. Montiel-Overall et al. (2016) suggest that there are three domains which cultural competence should impact: interpersonal, environmental, and cognitive. Each domain plays a critical role in developing cultural competence, which is foundational to cultural humility.

The interpersonal domain refers to the relationship-building aspect of cultural competence (Montiel-Overall et al., 2016, p. 35). This relationship-building can come in a variety of different venues, both formal and informal, including traveling to a different culture to learn about and absorb that culture, or reading a book about the beliefs and values of a culture. Montiel-Overall et al. (2016) do not dismiss the value of the interpersonal dynamics of cultural competence, but they suggest that to develop cultural competence, development must go beyond the interpersonal components.

Montiel-Overall et al. (2016) discuss the cognitive domain as a critical component of cultural competence. Montiel-Overall et al. (2016) state that the “cognitive domain is a starting point for developing cultural competence and it is built on the notion that cultural competence is a process of becoming culturally competent rather than being culturally competent” (p. 33). Cultural competency is a process which develops over time and involves reflecting on one’s behavior, attitudes, and underlying assumptions regarding many dynamics of life (Montiel-Overall, et al., 2016, p. 34). The cognitive domain of cultural competence is critical to its development because it entails self-awareness which aims to examine unconscious cultural values, norms, and ideas (Montiel-Overall, et al., 2016, p. 34).

The last component of cultural competence which Montiel-Overall et al. (2016) discuss is the environmental domain. This aspect focuses upon understanding the context in which activities and events occur (Montiel-Overall et al, 2016, p. 36). This can include looking at social, economic, and political factors which can play a role in aiding an individual to understand cultural dynamics (Montiel-Overall et al, 2016, p. 36).

While Montiel-Overall et al.’s (2016) work is notable, one can see some conflict between Montiel-Overall et al. (2016) and Hurley et al. (2019), specifically, can one apply the concept of cultural-humility to an environmental domain? While it may be possible to apply cultural humility to an environmental domain, the authors of this article agree with Hurley et al. (2019), when they state: “(w)e describe cultural humility as interpersonal and make no claims as to whether organizations can or cannot practice cultural humility” (p. 549). Subsequently, while Montiel-Overall’s work is notable, the authors of this article agree that the focus of cultural humility should be upon the librarians themselves. The authors of this article feel that while the concept of cultural humility may develop into one which could apply to an institutional level, in

order for it to be authentic, it must be integrated at a personal level first.

While there is some discussion on defining cultural humility, for this essay, the authors are in agreement with Hurley et al.'s (2019) definition: "cultural humility involves the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is others oriented in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the other person, the ability to recognize the context in which interactions occur, and a commitment to redress power imbalances and other structural issues to benefit all parties" (p. 549). For a librarian to begin the journey of cultural humility, they must recognize that inequity exists in many facets of librarianship. Secondly, aligning with Hurley, et al. (2019), they must see cultural humility as a process. While librarians can see cultural humility as an objective to meet, when framing it this way, they must also understand that it will be a lifelong process to truly develop cultural humility. Finally, in order for cultural humility to be authentic, it must be integrated at a personal level.

With a working definition in place, this essay will investigate how cultural humility could impact a reference interview. Two applications will be discussed: referrals and relational reference services.

## **Referrals**

Referrals are powerful in many facets of 21st-century life. If anyone has a need met in an environment which embraces compassion, that experience is often conveyed to friends and colleagues.

Approaching the reference interview through a lens of cultural humility is critical to a student's level of comfort when engaging with a librarian in the information seeking process. This is integral to trust building and the student's willingness to interact with the librarian on subsequent occasions. According to Hurley et al. (2019), an interpersonal and others-oriented mindset are the building blocks of cultural humility. If a college student has a positive interaction with a librarian who embraces an others-oriented attitude, the student is more likely to refer a peer to that librarian in the future than if the exchange was negative in nature. That is, an information exchange where a student feels valued and heard has the potential to impact other peers in that student's immediate college network who may communicate a need for similar research assistance in a casual conversation at the cafeteria or dorm.

In higher education, there is pressure upon all departments (academic programs, student activities, the library, etc...) to assist in student engagement and retention efforts. According to Bruce (2020), the library plays a significant role in facilitating and contributing to a student's

sense of belonging. In the context of an academic library, it is the librarians who can make a student feel valued (Bruce, 2020). Bruce (2020) states:

Individual research consultations and reference desk interactions are often the most intimate of teaching opportunities for librarians. These moments can be harnessed to cultivate connection and relationship. Because of the one-on-one nature of such interactions and the vulnerability required, librarians can either provide care or perpetuate the practices that lead to the disconnection a student may experience (para. 3).

Bruce (2020) argues that research consultations are more than an “exchange of information” (para. 8). She suggests that these consultations can also serve to reinforce personal and professional “belonging” for students (Bruce, 2020, para. 8).

When a librarian demonstrates cultural humility in a reference interview, this has the potential to significantly impact the belonging of not only the initial student being served, but that of subsequent peers the initial student may refer to the librarian in the future.

So, what does cultural humility look like in the preliminary reference interview phase? This is best exemplified by the following scenario. Between Bethany’s sophomore and junior year of college, she transferred from a community college to a state university. Bethany remembers the transition like it was yesterday: excited about the change, but the transfer meant making completely new friends, taking classes with faculty who she had never met before, and acclimating to a much larger library than she had access to at the community college. She remembers the first librarian that made an impression on her at the new university. The librarian was a middle-aged man who wore glasses and always had a kind smile. The librarian demonstrated an others-oriented mindset and facilitated a “sense of belonging” for Bethany (Hurley et al., 2019; Bruce 2020). The librarian never seemed too engrossed in what he was doing to take notice of the students who walked past the reference desk. Just past the reference desk where he sat were a few rows of computers available to students conducting research. The librarian would periodically get up from behind the reference desk and walk in-between the rows of computer stations in the information commons, asking individual students if there was anything he could do to assist them with their research. At the time, Bethany remembers thinking about how all librarians should exhibit this same level of caring and compassion.

Bethany’s junior year of college, she took an African-American history class, which necessitated a trip to the local historical society. In a conversation with the library director at



the historical society, the library director mentioned that her husband worked at the university which Bethany attended. Bethany quickly told the library director about the compassionate middle-aged librarian that took an “interpersonal stance” and others-oriented mindset (Hurley et al., 2019). After listening to the description of this librarian, the library director of the historical society said, “you must be talking about my husband.” The library director’s husband had impacted Bethany’s library experience in such a positive way that she did not hesitate to convey this meaningful exchange to another person. In fact, Bethany knew that should a peer in any one of her undergraduate classes need research assistance, she would refer them to this librarian.

Cultural humility is inherent to the reference interview. Many librarians take a class that discusses the reference interview while earning their Master of Library Science. This class can play a critical role in developing cultural humility as a foundational aspect to the profession. Future librarians often learn about the significance of the reference interview and are introduced to the Reference and User Services Association’s (RUSA) guidelines for engaging in a successful reference interview. According to RUSA’s guidelines, approachability is critical to any reference interview whether it takes place online or face-to-face. It is the librarian’s responsibility “to make the patron feel comfortable in a situation that can be perceived as intimidating, confusing, or overwhelming” (RUSA, 2013, 1.0 Visibility/Approachability section, para. 2). Librarians should also display “interest in the inquiries of patrons,” as this typically leads to a satisfied library user (RUSA, 2013, 2.0 Interest, para. 1). Cultural humility acknowledges inequity and subsequently fosters a mentality that creates a culture where the needs of the patron take precedence, subsequently aligning with (if not exceeding) RUSA’s guidelines.

While librarians may have a natural proclivity towards serving patrons, cultural humility is a process (Hurley et al., 2019, p. 550). This not only requires librarians to reflect on the ways they engage with patrons daily, but to assess barriers and inequities that prevent library users from seeking research assistance at the point of need. Potential barriers include signage that does not clearly direct students to where they should go to seek research assistance (RUSA, 2013). The physical reference desk can serve as a deterrent as well. Students who see a librarian sitting behind an imposing desk may be hesitant to solicit assistance for fear of interrupting the librarian or infringing upon the librarian’s space in general (Miller & Murillo, 2011; Liu, 2020). Embarrassment and anxiety can also impact a student’s willingness to seek help from a librarian (Miller & Murillo, 2011). Although it is unintentional, librarians do not always consider the fact that the lingo of the profession can function as a barrier to patrons. For example, some students may not know what the terms “reference” and “reference services” entail. Whether

students come across these words on the library's website or while walking through the library, they may be hesitant to inquire as to how reference applies to their immediate information seeking needs. In addition to this, students may be unaware of what a librarian's role is and the ways in which librarians are able to assist them in the research process (Miller & Murillo, 2011).

The authors of this article suggest that whether or not a librarian demonstrates an interpersonal and others-oriented mindset in an initial reference interview exchange will impact the likelihood of a student referring a peer to utilize the same service. Studies show that students typically do not seek out librarians first when they have a research need. Project Information Literacy has done a great deal of research on students and their information seeking behaviors. Head (2013), the executive director of Project Information Literacy, has engaged in surveys and interviews with students in higher education, resulting in some interesting findings with regard to students' information seeking patterns. When it came to conducting research for a class, students reported utilizing course readings, Google, and library databases most (Head, 2013). When it came to tapping into people as a resource, eighty-three percent of the students surveyed in 2010 reported going to professors, sixty-five percent engaged with classmates, forty-nine percent went to friends, and thirty percent sought out librarians (Head, 2013).

There is a marked difference between whom students consult with when they need resources for class versus life in general. In 2010, eighty-seven percent reported going to friends, fifty-three percent reported talking with professors, and fourteen percent sought librarians (Head, 2013). Head's findings as they pertain to college students' research behaviors are not isolated. According to Miller and Murillo (2011), who conducted interviews with undergraduate students at three universities in Illinois,

(s)tudents were more eager to go to peers and to family for help than seek librarians. To some extent, students' relationships with peers are determined by students' relationships with professors: students go to classmates in order to determine how to respond to their professors' expectations; in these ways, these helping relationships are influenced by students' relationships to the professor (p. 57).

Miller and Murillo (2011) point out that students' decisions to go to family and friends for research assistance may not necessarily lead to the acquisition of trustworthy information.

So why do students often seek out peers, family, and professors versus librarians when

they have an information need? According to Derks, Lee, and Krabbendam (2014), “(i)n the increasingly complex social world of adolescents, trust behavior is likely to be an essential feature of successful interactions with peers, parents and teachers” (p. 1380). Merriam Webster (2021) defines trust as a “reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something.” For librarians to develop rapport with students, trust must be established first.

In Bethany’s personal experience, exhibiting an others-oriented approach during a reference interview is an effective way to generate trust and subsequently, peer referrals. From 2016-2019, she served as the Library Director for the Ivy Tech, Columbus campus. Ivy Tech is a large community college system in Indiana and is comprised of several campuses. The University Library of Columbus is unique in that it serves the faculty, staff, and students of several academic institutions – Indiana University-Purdue University, Ivy Tech, and Purdue Polytechnic Institute. At the time of employment, Trine University also resided on the campus. While four institutions are located on one campus, Ivy Tech and Indiana University-Purdue University are the only institutions which staff the University Library of Columbus. The librarians and support staff from these two institutions serve the entire campus, regardless of an individual’s institutional affiliation.

About a year into her employment with Ivy Tech, Bethany met a student named Jeff<sup>1</sup>, who attended Purdue Polytechnic Institute. Jeff was enrolled in a four-year engineering degree program and needed assistance with a research project. Jeff and Bethany met periodically and/or e-mailed back and forth about questions which Jeff had regarding research. Bethany and Jeff talked about developing a thesis statement, identifying sources for a literature review, and miscellaneous other research questions. Bethany had known Jeff for about a year when he brought a fellow engineering student by her office. Jeff told Bill<sup>1</sup> that Bethany had helped him with his research in the past, so he wanted to introduce Bill to her. Bill told Bethany about his research and she met periodically with Bill for several months until he graduated from Purdue Polytechnic Institute.

So how did this peer referral come to fruition? When Jeff and Bethany first met, trust was built over a series of reference interviews. Jeff knew that he could ask any research question and that she would not pass judgment on him or make him feel inadequate as a researcher. Bethany always put work aside when Jeff walked into her office, and she valued Jeff’s research interests (RUSA, 2013). As a result, Jeff felt comfortable introducing his friend Bill to Bethany. In other words, Bethany embraced cultural humility. In so doing, she conveyed to Jeff and

---

<sup>1</sup>The names Jeff and Bill are not the real names of the students in Author 2’s narrative.

Bill that their research interests and needs were more important than the other tasks in which she was engaged. Whether or not Bethany's door was open or closed, she was in the midst of a conversation with another student or staff member, or in the middle of lunch, Jeff and Bill did not hesitate to stop by Bethany's office. She eliminated barriers that could have impeded a meaningful reference interview with Jeff, thereby preventing a reference interview referral from ever coming to fruition with Bill. These students became Bethany's priority the moment they sent her an e-mail or entered her office, which led Bill and Jeff to return time and time again to seek assistance.

In Bethany's tenure as a librarian, she has experienced more than one student peer referral, but those referrals may not have been as obvious as the one that transpired in the scenario with Jeff and Bill. Most of the reference interview referrals of which Bethany is aware have come from faculty encouraging students to visit her or from faculty encouraging colleagues to utilize the library and its staff.

The authors of this article suggest that when the reference interview is viewed through the lens of cultural humility it can lead to the positive formation of a relationship with the initial student served, potentially generating a peer referral later on. In the case of a research consultation, Bruce (2020) argues that "librarians [must] not only evaluate the academic need, but often attend to the emotions of the student as well" (para. 7). This is at the heart of cultural humility, which requires librarians to embrace an others-oriented mindset.

## **Relational Reference Services**

When initiating a reference interview, students often want more than just answers to their questions. As many 21st-century students pursue research in areas of personal investment, it takes a certain level of trust for students to feel comfortable sharing their needs. As exemplified in the above section on referrals, practicing cultural humility in the reference interview can play a role in developing this needed trust with students (Montiel-Overall et al., 2016, p. 35). Cultural humility invites librarians to engage with students as whole persons instead of approaching the reference interview as merely a transaction or mechanical information exchange.

This personal approach to the reference interview, here termed "relational reference

services,” draws on two foundational concepts. First is a definition of personhood born out of the Christian concept of the Trinity, particularly the social Trinity<sup>2</sup>. According to this understanding, “[p]ersons are uniquely distinct, but they are never independent. They exist in conditions of mutual giving and receiving; not just in the receiving and giving of gifts, but in the giving and receiving of one another” (Kinlaw, 2005, p. 82). Thus, librarians engaging in relational reference services will recognize that they are in a position to both give and receive and that, furthermore, it is not simply information that they are exchanging with the student; rather, the librarian is other-oriented and self-giving in the reference interview and is actively seeking to know the patron as a person.

This leads into the second foundational concept for relational reference services, that of “story collecting.” According to Saccone (2009), “(h)uman beings long for their story to be known, and most of us live our lives without consistently experiencing this as a pervasive and deeper reality in our personal world” (p. 56). Saccone’s solution to this is for people to become what he calls “story collectors, [who] focus on drawing out the *dreams, life history, and personhood* of the people in their lives” (2009, p. 58, emphasis in original). Trott (2019) applied Saccone’s concept of story collecting to the reference interview: “(w)hen practicing story collecting in a [reference interview], a vague reference inquiry, such as ‘I need information on cerebral palsy,’ can mark the beginning of a relationship instead of a simple transaction” (p. 198). As librarians act as story collectors, asking good questions, they will begin to understand the context of the inquiry in terms of the student’s dreams, life history, and personhood, which can in turn help both in narrowing the information request and in establishing trust (Trott, 2019, p. 198). Such relational reference services empower students to pursue their interests and contribute to the scholarly conversation from their own diverse perspectives.

It takes a certain amount of courage for students to initiate a reference interview. To start the process, they have to begin with those difficult three words: “I don’t know.” Students may consider ignorance a bad thing, a secret shame to be shoved down and never brought to light. As Mabry (2004) has observed, “(n)early every user wonders internally if he dares to express ignorance (which in class might get a lower grade)” (p. 44). Yet ignorance when faced head-on is

---

<sup>1</sup> For a clear discussion of scholarship on the social Trinity, along with the impact this concept has for how to understand human personhood, see S. J. Grenz (2001), “From social personalism to the image of God: Theology and the rebirth of the soul,” introduction to *The social God and the relational self: A trinitarian theology of the imago Dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox), pp. 1-20.

a launchpad for discovery. “I don’t know” can just as easily be the catalyst for a grand adventure as it can be the abrupt end of an intellectual pursuit. It is the responsibility of librarians to cultivate an environment that invites adventure, meeting “I don’t know” with frank curiosity and engaging the student on a quest for co-discovery.

In a world where academic libraries increasingly face the need for virtual reference services (Radford, Costello, & Montague, 2021; Vogus, 2020), the reference interview not only involves students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, but also students who are currently in a variety of cultural situations. This is frequently the case in Grace’s library, since her institution serves a largely online student population. Through online education, international students can study from their home country, bringing all the richness of their own customs, questions, and languages to the reference interview. Such diversity in culture brings its own set of challenges to the reference interview, along with thrilling opportunities. Cultural humility plays a key role in working through the challenges and celebrating the opportunities.

In any reference interview, but particularly in a virtual reference interview involving a librarian and a student in different countries, the individuals approach the research question from different reference points. This could cause confusion with something as simple as differing vocabulary between librarian and student, or the cultural gap could run as deep as basic assumptions and worldview. When Grace interacts with students in a reference interview, it is usually in the context of their coursework or as they seek information for a specific need. While there are some commonalities in Grace’s patrons, students still come from a variety of religious backgrounds, cultures, and nations to the library looking for answers. Grace’s response as a librarian must involve not only a willingness to try different vocabulary for search terms, but also an intentional effort to ask the right questions. For example, if Grace helps a student develop an idea for an essay or find resources related to a given topic, her mind will supply related topics from categories shaped by her particular experiences of life and ministry as a Protestant in the American Deep South--which may or may not relate to the student’s experience as an Anglican in Kenya. This is a rather obvious example, but the reality is that each student approaches the reference interview with questions, vocabulary, assumptions, and a way of thinking that may not align with the librarian’s framework for understanding the world. It is imperative that librarians, as information professionals, keep in mind that their experiences shape the way they approach everything, including the reference interview--and that students will come to the reference interview with their own experientially rooted and culturally driven

assumptions.

The key to approaching the reference interview rightly, then, is an attitude of humility, a deep desire to orient ourselves toward the other, and a curiosity that drives us to listen well. This is similar to Hurley et al.'s (2019) description of cultural humility, when they state that it "involves the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other oriented" (p. 549). This attitude of humble curiosity is crucial in relational reference services, both in a general sense as librarians seek to establish an atmosphere of co-discovery and in a specific sense as librarians seek to learn from a student's cultural background. Mabry (2004) calls the reference interview "essentially a partnership," noting that "nothing good will ultimately come of something that is perceived in any way but equality between [user and librarian], meeting in time in one moment" (p. 42). Similarly, Robinson (2017) argues for the use of Socratic questioning in the library in an effort to "[demonstrate] the librarian's role as non-expert, as facilitator and partner. The method exemplifies librarians' desire to empower, encourage, empathize, and engage with students as novice researchers" (para 6). When students show enough courage to admit a knowledge gap on their part, librarians owe it to the students to admit that librarians, too, can learn something from them.

In addition to the differing assumptions librarians and students bring to the reference interview, a second challenge is the resources available. With limited budgets, libraries necessarily focus the majority of their collections on the subject areas that will serve the largest portion of their community. Likewise, languages and formats are frequently dictated by the majority. For example, Ibacache (2021) found that among 87 research universities in the United States, only five collected more than 500 resources in Latin American Indigenous languages (p. 188). Ibacache (2021) noted that the budget allocation which is needed to change these collection trends "is problematic, especially in these COVID-19 pandemic times," but maintained that something must be done to increase accessibility to these minority language resources (p. 194). Indeed, while a focused collection serves the library community well and makes good use of resources, it presents a challenge when the patron is looking for resources that fall outside the collection. If the student needs resources in a language or subject area that is not widely collected, the reference interview is less likely to be successful. To make matters more difficult, the fault does not always lie with library collection practices; often, libraries cannot collect as extensively in a certain area because there is a paucity of research in the field from certain perspectives. In one sense, this gap in the research offers an exciting opportunity for new

contributions; yet from a reference perspective, it often means that information needs go unmet. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to fully address these issues, it is important to note that librarians who wish to engage in cultural humility need to do what they can to seek fairness in collection development and scholarly representation.

A final challenge for relational reference involves the authority dynamics of various cultures. Any student, depending on personality--but particularly students from cultures that highly honor education and authority--may approach the reference interview with an elevated sense of the librarian's status. Robinson (2017) recognizes that because "librarians are seen as authorities, gatekeepers who provide access to necessary information . . . it is important to establish a cooperative agenda that recognizes librarian authority while empowering the student [to] guide the interaction" (Empowerment section, para. 1). This kind of cooperative dynamic at once eases student trepidation, encouraging them to share their own thoughts, and honors cultural expectations of hierarchy as much as possible.

Conducting the reference interview involves challenges, particularly when the student and the librarian come from differing cultural backgrounds. Students must face a gap in their knowledge and overcome the fear to admit this gap, as well as to trust another person with their need to initiate a reference interview. Perhaps the best tactic which librarians can use to meet students' "I don't know" is a librarian's "I don't know." Such an attitude invites librarians to grow in understanding the students' perspective, creates a sense of mutual searching--even if the resources are lacking just where they are needed--and allays the students' fear of sharing their own ideas. Approaching the reference interview with cultural humility plays a critical role in the thrilling adventure of co-discovery.

## **Conclusion**

Cultural humility can impact reference interviews. In order for that impact to take place, however, this article suggests that three critical components must take place. First, one must acknowledge that inequity exists, even in the many factors that impact a reference interview. Secondly, librarians must acknowledge that learning cultural humility is a life-long process, not a simple competency. Third, interpersonal, cognitive, and environmental components of a reference interview need addressing to apply cultural humility in that context.

This essay aims to provide a glimpse of what cultural humility could look like when



applied to a reference interview and the potential impact cultural humility could have upon Library and Information Science. A key component of cultural humility is its progressive nature, one that requires an individual to both acknowledge that there will always be room for development in this area, and the subsequent need to keep pursuing growth and development in this area. Embracing cultural humility has the potential to transform many aspects of the profession, including reference interviews.

## References

- Andrews, N., Kim, S., & Watanabe, J. (2018). Cultural Humility as a Transformative Framework for Librarians, Tutors, and Youth Volunteers: Applying a Lens of Cultural Responsiveness in Training Library Staff and Volunteers. *Young Adult Library Services*, 16(2), 19–24.
- Brown, S. W. (2008). The Reference Interview: Theories and Practice. *Library Philosophy & Practice*. <http://libr.unl.edu:2000/LPP/willenbrown.htm>.
- Bruce, S. (2020, February 5). Teaching with care: A relational approach to individual research consultations. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2020/teaching-with-care/>.
- Corey, E. (2021, Winter). Questioning Cultural Humility. *National Affairs*, 46, 159–170.
- Derks, J., Lee, N.C., & Krabbendam, L. (2014, December). Adolescent Trust and Trustworthiness: Role of Gender and Social Value Orientation. *Journal of Adolescence*, 37(8), 1379-1386. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2014.09.014>.
- Head, A. (2013, April 10-13). *Project Information Literacy: What Can Be Learned about the Information-seeking Behavior of Today's College Students?* [Conference session]. Association of College and Research Libraries Conference, Indianapolis, IN, U.S.
- Hodge, T. (2019). Integrating Cultural Humility into Public Services Librarianship.

*International Information and Library Review*, 51(3), 268–274.

Hook, J. N., Davis, D. E., Owen, J., Worthington, E. L., & Utsey, S. O. (2014). Cultural Humility: Measuring Openness to Culturally Diverse Clients. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 60(3), 353–366.

Hook, J. N., & Watkins, C. E. (2015). Cultural Humility: The Cornerstone of Positive Contact with Culturally Different Individuals and Groups? *American Psychologist*, 70(7), 661–662.

Hurley, D. A., Kostecky, S. R., & Townsend, L. (2019). Cultural Humility in Libraries. *Reference Services Review*, 47(4), 544–555. <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-06-2019-0042>.

Ibacache, K.S. (2021). University libraries as advocates for Latin American Indigenous languages and cultures. *College & Research Libraries*, 82(2), 182-198. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.82.2.182>.

Jennerich, E. Z., & Jennerich, E. J. (1997). *The Reference Interview as a Creative Art*. Libraries Unlimited.

Katz, W. A. (2002). *Introduction to Reference Work: Reference Services and Reference Processes* (Vol. 2). McGraw-Hill.

Kern, M. K. (2015). The Reference interview revisited. In D. A. Tyckoson & J. G. Dove (Eds.), *Reimagining reference in the 21st century* (pp. 61–74). Purdue University Press.

Kinlaw, D. F. (2005). *Let's Start with Jesus: A New Way of Doing Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Liu, L (2020). Models of reference services. In M. Wong & L. Saunders (Eds.), *Reference and information services: An introduction*. (pp. 108-130). Libraries Unlimited.

- Mabry, C.H. (2004). The reference interview as partnership: An examination of librarian, library user, and social interaction. *The Reference Librarian*, 40(83-84), 41-56. Doi: 0.1300/J120v40n83\_05.
- Merriam-Webster. (2021). *Trust*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trust>.
- Mestre, L. S. (2010). Librarians Working with Diverse Populations: What Impact Does Cultural Competency Training Have on Their Efforts. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 36(6), 479–488.
- Miller, S., & Murillo, N. (2011). Why don't students ask librarians for help? Undergraduate help-seeking behavior in three academic libraries. In L.M. Duke & A.D. Asher (Eds.), *College libraries and student culture: What we now know*. (pp. 51-65). ALA.
- Montiel-Overall, P., Nunez, A. V., & Reyes-Escudero, V. (2016). *Latinos in Libraries, Museums, and Archives*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character Strengths and Virtues*. Oxford University Press.
- Radford, M.L., Costello, L., & Montague, K. (2021). Surging virtual reference services: COVID-19 a game changer. *College & Research Libraries News*, 82(3), 106. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.82.3.106>.
- Reitmanova, S., & Gustafson, D. L. (2008). “They can't understand it”: Maternity health and care needs of immigrant Muslim women in St. John's, Newfoundland. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 12(1), 101–111.
- Robinson, S. M. (2017, November 1). Socratic questioning: A teaching philosophy for the student research consultation. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2017/socratic-questioning/>.

RUSA. (2013, May 28). *Guidelines for behavioral performance of reference and information service providers*. American Library Association. <https://www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral>.

Saccone, S. (2009). *Relational intelligence: How leaders can expand their influence through a new way of being smart*. New York: Wiley.

Tervalon, M., & Murray-Garcia, J. (1998). Cultural Humility versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction in Defining Physician Training Outcomes in Multicultural Education. *Journal of Healthcare for the Poor and Underserved*, 9(2), 117–125.

Trott, G. (2019). The Relational Interaction: A New Look at Glorifying God through a Reference Interview. In G. Trott (Ed.), *The Faithful Librarian* (pp. 189-205). Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Vogus, B. (2020). Examining virtual reference services in academic libraries. *Public Services Quarterly*, 16(4), 249-253. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2020.1818664>.tre