BRAVERMAN PRIZE ESSAY

TOWARDS A PROGRESSIVE DISCOURSE ON COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT: perspectives from collaborative ethnography and action research

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We are dealing with a small crowd of people whom we call "our public." Who are the public? Why, you and I, and my family, and others just like us. They want just the same things that we do, and to be accommodated in just the same way that we do. The public is no indefinite, intangible somebody. It is just "we."[1]

Gratia A. Countryman, 1905

Libraries are never more alienating than when they assume that the patrons passing through their doors are simply "others just like us." While each patron deserves the same respect and the same access to information that we as librarians do, different patrons have different information needs that grow out of the material conditions and cultural contexts in which they live their lives. "They" almost certainly do not want just the same things that "we" do, and libraries that miss this point are destined to be, at best, out of touch, and at worst, complicit in the invisibility of anything or anyone outside the dominant culture. Fortunately, librarians have come to think about the information needs of specific populations in more sophisticated terms than the ones being used in 1905. We have started to recognize that marginalized groups have distinct information needs, needs that we have an obligation to meet if we are serious about serving the public – not just part of the public, but all of it.

The practice of community needs assessment has evolved over time as an instrument for documenting and analyzing the information needs of the populations served by a given library. Community needs assessment goes beyond abstractly advising librarians to "know your community." It involves the adoption of specific methods from the field of social research,

and it has a specific history in the context of American public librarianship. In 1922, for example, Indiana's Evansville Public Library commissioned a neighborhood survey that sent a citizen's advisory committee out on several hundred home visits. Historians have described the Evansville survey as "exceptional for its time," because it relied neither on impressionistic observations nor on indirect sources like circulation records.[2] Librarian Ethel McCullough wanted to know what the people of Evansville were interested in reading, and so she went out and asked them. During the 1930s and 40s, the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago became the center for research on community analysis; *The Library's Public*, published by the dean of the library school in 1949, was seen for decades as the landmark work in the field.[3] Later research came out of the University of Southern California, where a dedicated Community Analysis Research Institute developed a new model for needs assessment based on the interplay of individuals, groups, agencies and lifestyles.[4] Unfortunately, the formalization of community needs assessment methodology has also led to a myopic focus on quantitative research.[5] By restricting themselves to research instruments that will produce "rigorous" or "objective" results, librarians have made it more difficult to ask the kind of broad, contextual questions that are well suited to qualitative research. Furthermore, recent perspectives on the benefits of needs assessment have tended to focus on the efficient administration of the library, rather than an ambitious commitment to outreach.[6] While the results of a needs assessment can be used to justify phasing out services that are underutilized, the primary goal of a needs assessment should be to plan for new services that meet previously unacknowledged community needs.

Identifying and Analyzing User Needs, by Lynn Westbrook, is probably the most current and comprehensive handbook on community needs assessment. Published in 2001, the book walks librarians through the process of planning, carrying out, and acting on the results of a needs assessment, even as it carefully delineates the things that a community needs assessment is not.[7] In many ways, the book represents a snapshot of current thinking in the library and information science field, and in certain ways it might even be described as progressive. Rather than advocating the use of exclusively quantitative research instruments, Westbrook introduces the idea of triangulation, whereby both quantitative and qualitative methods are used in order to get a clearer picture of the community's information needs.[8] And while Westbrook's list of reasons for conducting a needs assessment does slant toward administrative issues like budgetary planning and resource allocation, she also cites identifying and understanding people who do not use the library as "the single most crucial purpose" of any needs assessment.[9] Even though Westbrook does not couch this statement in the language of social justice or information equity, her focus on underserved populations still shares common ground with a more explicitly progressive definition of public service.

In this paper, I want to offer a critique of the prevailing discourse on community needs assessment, as represented by Westbrook's *Identifying*

and Analyzing User Needs. This critique extends beyond debates over research instruments or rhetorics for justifying needs assessment, in that it seeks to destabilize some of the profession's most fundamental assumptions about whose knowledge is valuable and to what ends knowledge should be used. I will argue that the prevailing discourse on community needs assessment conceptualizes community analysis as something that is done *to* the community in question, rather than *with* the community in any meaningful way. (The library assesses the community; subject verb object.) I will then draw upon the emerging fields of collaborative ethnography and action research in order to sketch the contours of an alternative discourse on community needs assessment, a discourse that attempts to reimagine needs assessment as a collaboration between library and community, even as it inscribes positive social change as the ultimate goal of the research endeavor. From this perspective, community needs assessment would not just strive to make the library more efficient; it would strive to make the communities that the library serves more free. The critique that I am offering may be described as a radical one, in that it seeks to challenge both the political neutrality and the epistemological positivism that too often characterize the library profession. But if we are to realize a truly progressive mode of librarianship, we must begin by interrogating the forms of privilege that allow us to tell the communities that we serve: "We're professionals. How about you leave this to us?"

In the early pages of *Identifying and Analyzing User Needs*, Westbrook does touch upon the possibility of community collaboration. Chapter 2, entitled "Laying the Groundwork," suggests that libraries should consider hiring an outside consultant to conduct the needs assessment, because of the swiftness and efficiency with which he or she could complete the project. However, Westbrook acknowledges that

> another option is available: sacrificing efficiency for the possibility of long-term productivity by involving others in the process. That involvement could move up and down a continuum as needed and appropriate, from simple information to active participation.[10]

Westbrook correctly points out that the design and execution of the needs assessment would become less efficient as it became more participatory. Then, for a split second, she appears to entertain the possibility of measuring the project's success against some benchmark other than that of efficiency. Regrettably, this moment slips away, and as Chapter 2 continues to unfold the community reprises its role as the inert object of analysis. For instance, Westbrook predicts that some staff may fear that any information need identified through the needs assessment will be validated "without regard for the expertise of the librarians involved in meeting that need." "In reality," Westbrook reassures, "the judgment of the professional staff is the driving force behind each phase of the process, especially in the final decisions regarding the action plan...The expertise of librarians is not only respected by, but is crucial to, the [needs assessment] process."[11] Here, the

uppity community is put in its place for voicing inappropriate information needs. The expertise that the librarians wield entitles them to decide which of the community's information needs will and will not be met. These decisions will be accepted at face value by the community, who are, after all, not experts, not even on the subject of their own needs.[12]

Westbrook's skepticism about the value of community collaboration continues to surface in subsequent chapters of *Identifying and Analyzing User Needs*. In Chapter 7, "Launching A Study," Westbrook considers the question of who will gather the data for the needs assessment. She identifies library staff and trained volunteers as the most desirable choices, but grudgingly admits that "as a final option, outsiders can handle some tasks...While unskilled outsiders require extensive and careful supervision, their involvement may pay off in the long run if they become library advocates."[13] This latter statement is fascinating. In the space of a single sentence, Westbrook dismisses community members as "unskilled" (ignoring the possibility that they may have access to knowledge or skills that the library staff would lack), implies that they are untrustworthy, and characterizes their involvement as valuable only in the event that they become library advocates in the future. The idea that having people gather information about their own community might be inherently valuable is not entertained. So perhaps it should come as no surprise that there is absolutely no mention of community involvement in Chapter 8, "Analyzing the Results." The library analyzes the community; subject verb object. At no point is the community given the opportunity to evaluate the conclusions of the assessment team or to participate in the design of an action plan. At most, the community is to be kept informed of the initiatives that are to be launched on its behalf and in its name. Westbrook suggests "a newsletter, bookmark, e-mail notice, or newspaper column" as reasonable ways of accomplishing this goal.[14]

In fairness to Lynn Westbrook, *Identifying and Analyzing User Needs* is hardly unique in its disregard for the input of the community under study. Westbrook is drawing on a long tradition of social research that wraps itself in the mantle of impersonal objectivity, determined to prove that a psychological theory or an economic model can be every bit as "scientific" as a physicist's equations. Yet it is here that anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker identified "an important distinguishing point between the social and natural sciences. There is no reciprocal personal communication between the physicist and atoms, molecules, or electrons, nor does he become part of the situation studied."[15] Practitioners of social research study people, who are complex and unpredictable and have very real opinions about the conclusions that researchers draw about their lives. Among the social sciences, it is anthropology that has proved most receptive to these insights, and over the past thirty years anthropologists have been asking each other terrifically difficult questions about their relationships to the communities that they study. They have learned to think critically about the power dynamics between researcher and informant, and they have come to describe their craft in terms of interpretation, rather than science.[16]

Over the past decade, anthropologists have also expressed a growing interest in collaborative ethnography,[17] a school of thought within social research that could (I argue) inaugurate an alternative discourse of community needs assessment within the field of library and information science. Luke Eric Lassiter has described collaborative ethnography as "an approach to ethnography that deliberately and explicitly emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it – from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process."[18] Researchers regard members of the community under study not as subjects or informants, but as co-intellectuals who shape the direction that the research takes. For Lassiter, "collaborative ethnography is first and foremost an ethical and moral enterprise, and subsequently a political one."[19] Hence, even though one goal of collaborative ethnography may be to produce "better" and more accurate social research, the collaborative ethnographer would be more inclined to measure "better" research in terms of relationships with community members that are characterized by mutual respect and intellectual honesty. Lassiter's vision of collaborative ethnography also involves producing texts that are comprehensible and useful to the communities under study, specifically by inviting community members to comment on and contribute to the text. Extending this invitation means surrendering some of the professional authority (and authorial privilege) behind which academics routinely hide. Unquestionably, it involves risk – but also the potential for great reward.

What would it look like if librarians carried out a community needs assessment modeled on the practice of collaborative ethnography? Presumably, it would look quite different from the model proposed in *Identifying and Analyzing User Needs*. The planning process might begin with a series of community conversations about the use of information in everyday life. Library staff could use transcripts of these conversations to generate a preliminary list of research objectives, which would then be brought back to the community for comment and further discussion.

Next, teams of community members, library staff, and experienced social researchers would be brought together in order to focus on a particular segment of the community; one option would be to bring in an outside consultant, although professors and students at a nearby university might be able to join the project for free as part of a service learning initiative. The teams would be encouraged to think creatively about how they could document the community's information needs; traditional research instruments like focus groups and interviews could be supplemented by "household information diaries" and participant-observation. Each team would present their findings to the library staff, and would then work alongside the staff to develop the relevant service objectives and priorities.[20] Of course, by now Lynn Westbrook might be forgiven for protesting: "But a consultant who had been given a free hand could have finished this project months ago!" This is probably true. But in the words of anthropologist Glenn Hinson:

> True collaboration entails a sharing of authority and a sharing of visions. This means more than just asking for consultant commentary, more than inviting contributions that deepen but don't derail, more than the kind of community tokenism that invites contributors to the opening but not to the planning sessions. Sharing authority and visions means inviting consultants to shape form, text, and intended audience. It also means directing the collaborative work toward multiple ends, ends that speak to different needs and different constituencies, ends that might be so differently defined as to have never even been considered by one or more of the collaborating parties.[21]

Westbrook was surely correct when she observed that social research becomes less efficient as it becomes more participatory. However, I would argue that the loss of efficiency that a library sustains by adopting collaborative ethnography as the model for its needs assessment would be more than outweighed by the opportunity to forge a genuine partnership between library and community – and by the chance to meet culturally specific information needs that might otherwise have gone overlooked.

Community needs assessment that is rooted in collaborative ethnography would democratize the research process and affirm the importance of local knowledge held by the community. However, a truly progressive discourse on community needs assessment would also need to include an explicit commitment to social change. Of course, many individual librarians are already concerned with issues of social justice, and yet I would argue that insights from the field of action research might help these librarians to frame a more robust theoretical framework for progressive librarianship.[22] Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin have described action research as "a form of research that generates knowledge claims for the express purpose of taking action to promote social change and social analysis."[23] More specifically, practitioners of action research believe that "those who face social problems have much of the information and analytical capacity needed to solve them."[24] This is a point of commonality between action research and collaborative ethnography, both of which seek to acknowledge and build upon the knowledge of the community under study (rather than categorically asserting the superiority of "expert" outside knowledge). Yet while a community needs assessment based on collaborative ethnography might be content to document the information needs of underserved populations, a model of community needs assessment that also incorporated action research would consider the ways in which increased access to information could help to liberate these populations from isolation, injustice, or oppression.

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator whose work has profoundly influenced action research, cautioned people of privilege working on behalf of oppressed populations to think critically about their motives. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* observes that "attempting to liberate the

oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building."[25] And, elsewhere, "the man or woman who proclaims devotion to the cause of liberation yet is unable to enter into communion with the people, whom he or she continues to regard as totally ignorant, is grievously self-deceived."[26] Freire's words should resonate with every would-be practitioner of a truly progressive librarianship. Community needs assessment can be a tool for political empowerment and social justice, but only when the initiatives growing out of the needs assessment are developed in collaboration with the community and in response to its real, not imagined, needs. Hence, it would be pointless and insensitive for a library to host a job fair aimed at homeless patrons without first ascertaining the information needs of this population. Perhaps many of the library's homeless patrons are employed, or do not want to be employed, or already have sources of information on employment and depend on the library for other services. Truly progressive librarians understand that uninformed efforts at activism can be just another form of privileged self-absorption.

As libraries devote increasing amounts of time and energy to serving communities that have been traditionally underserved, the practice of community needs assessment has the potential to offer valuable insight into the information needs of these populations. Currently, the prevailing discourse on community needs assessment tends to focus on swift, efficient execution of putatively objective research. This approach constitutes the community as the passive object of expert knowledge, and it fails to consider the community's perspectives on its own information needs. Happily, insights from the fields of collaborative ethnography and action research can provide a framework for an alternative discourse of community needs assessment based on authentic partnership and commitment to social change. Instead of the library assessing the community, subject verb object, progressive librarians can use their creativity and compassion to invent a new, more egalitarian grammar of needs assessment.

Notes

1. Countryman, Gratia A. "The Library as Social Centre." *The library and society: reprints of papers and addresses*. ed. Arthur E. Bostwick. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1920. 434.
2. Evans, Charles. "A History of Community Analysis in American Librarianship." *Library Trends* 24(3), January 1976. 446-448.
3. Ibid., 451.
4. Greer, Roger C. and Hale, Martha L. "The Community Analysis Process." *Public Librarianship: A Reader*. ed. Jane Robbins-Carter. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1982. 358-367.
5. For instance, the most recent edition of *Basic Research Methods for Librarians*, eds. Ronald R. Powell and Lynn Silipigni Connaway, includes just one chapter on qualitative research methods. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2004.
6. See the list of benefits to be expected from a user needs assessment in *Guide to Library User Needs Assessment for Integrated Information Resource Management and Collection Development*, eds. Biblarz, Bosch, and Sugnet. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001. 7.
7. Westbrook, Lynn. *Identifying and Analyzing User Needs*. New York: Neal-Schuman,

2001. 3-4.

8. ibid., 72.
9. ibid., 10.
10. ibid., 16.
11. ibid., 24.
12. This discourse of professional expertise also crops up in Chapter 4, "Framing Questions and Choosing Tools," when Westbrook considers the case of a public library with "a large number of patrons referred by local social support agencies." In this case, Westbrook advises, "it might be worthwhile to meet with a few directors of those agencies to identify their priorities. Are these agency directors most interested in raising literacy levels, identifying employment opportunities, supporting parents, or some other issue?" Quoted from p. 65. I would suggest that it is at least as important to identify the priorities of the patrons as it is to identify the priorities of the agency directors.
13. Westbrook, 156-157.
14. ibid., 197.
15. Powdermaker, Hortense. *Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1966. 286.
16. A good starting point from which to explore this literature is *The Interpretation of Cultures*, by Clifford Geertz. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
17. The *Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology* defines ethnography as "a descriptive account of social life and culture in a particular social system based on detailed observations of what people actually do." Ethnographers will argue with each other for hours about how to define ethnography, but this is a serviceable thumbnail definition. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 111.
18. Lassiter, Luke Eric. *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 16. Emphasis in original.
19. ibid., 79.
20. I have borrowed this model for a collaborative ethnographic investigation from Luke Eric Lassiter's study, *The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie's African-American Community*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004.
21. Hinson, Glenn. *Fire In My Bones: Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African-American Gospel*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000. 2.
22. The most recent edition of *Basic Research Methods for Librarians* briefly touches on action research, although I tend to doubt that the editors had a full understanding of what action research involves. I am basing this conclusion on their stated belief that the steps involved in action research "do not differ significantly from those typically followed in a basic research study." 55. Whatever one thinks about the merits of action research, the steps involved in carrying it out are unquestionably different from those involved in a basic research study.
23. Greenwood, Davydd J. and Levin, Morten. *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998. 6.
24. ibid., 95.
25. Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 2000. 65.
26. ibid., 61.