Constance Mellon's "Library Anxiety": An Appreciation and a Critique

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Introduction

Even after almost thirty years, I vividly remember reading Constance A. Mellon's article, "Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development," when it appeared in the March 1986 issue of *College & Research Libraries*.[1] I was a reference librarian at DePauw University in Indiana at the time, helping students individually and in "bibliographic instruction" classes. The resonance I felt when I read about library anxiety was powerful: yes, I thought; this is what I'm seeing in my students, who seem overwhelmed by the library, in need of librarians' help, yet reluctant to approach us. To have the phenomenon confirmed by research and given a name authenticated it and enabled my colleagues and me to address it directly with students and faculty. I was also intrigued by Mellon's method. I had never heard of grounded theory before, but a method that based its conclusions on students' own rich descriptions of their realities greatly appealed to me. A few years later, when I was studying naturalistic/interpretivist research methodology at Indiana University, I read Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss's book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory,* and did my own grounded theory study on choices made by academic reference librarians while working with students.[2]

My experience evidently was not unique. Mellon's article was chosen as one of the seven most important in the 75-year history of *College & Research Libraries* because it made "library anxiety," a phenomenon observed by practitioners, official and uncovered its origins. The article also legitimized the use of qualitative research methods by giving grounded theory wide recognition in a premier journal.

In this essay, I summarize Mellon's method and findings, trace the article's influence, offer a critique, and suggest some directions for future research.

Summary

Mellon studied student-written documents about libraries from classes of twenty English composition instructors over a two-year period. It is estimated that she analyzed roughly 6,000 research journal entries and in-class essays assigned by the instructors.[3] Seventy-five to 85 percent of the students used the language of fear when describing their feelings about using the library to find information needed for academic projects. They reported feeling lost in four ways: the size of the library overwhelmed them; they did not know where things like the reference collection and the card catalog were located; they were unsure how to begin their research; and they did not understand what seemed to them arcane library systems.[4] Mellon reported that three concepts

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emerged from the papers: "(1) students generally feel that their own library-use skills are inadequate while the skills of other students are adequate, (2) the inadequacy is shameful and should be hidden, and (3) the inadequacy would be revealed by asking questions."[5] She concluded, "When confronted with the need to gather information in the library for their first research paper many students become so anxious that they are unable to approach the problem logically or effectively."[6]

One of the striking features of Mellon's work is the interdisciplinarity of her study; she pulled in the idea of "personal documents" from qualitative research, linked it to "personal writing" from Writing across the Curriculum, and applied theories of test and math anxiety from education and psychology. She developed her understanding of library anxiety, using the method of grounded theory, from sociology. Although Mellon was not the first to discuss or recommend qualitative methods in general, her study confirmed the value of this type of inquiry for hearing authentic voices and discovering previously unknown constructs and phenomena.

Influence

The enduring influence of Mellon's article can be seen in its citation patterns. As of this writing, Web of Science shows over 120 citations, and Google Scholar over 400, including more than twenty in 2014. The construct of library anxiety has become well entrenched and continues to be discussed and studied. A LISA search reveals ninety-nine hits as of this writing. Mellon's article inspired a long line of important researchers on library anxiety. Carol C. Kuhlthau's Information Search Process, published in 1991, cited Mellon, and Kuhlthau's depiction of students' fear at the beginning of the research process is similar to what Mellon described.[7] Much early work went into developing and testing instruments for measuring library anxiety. Sharon L. Bostick developed in her dissertation a Library Anxiety Scale (LAS) in 1992, designed to test library anxiety in undergraduates. She differentiated anxiety about the library from anxiety about librarians and identified five antecedents.[8] Qun Jiao and Anthony Onwuegbuzie published twenty-one articles, together and separately, between 1997 and 2008. They used the LAS, paired with other instruments, to find correlations between library anxiety and demographic characteristics, learning preferences, and personal characteristics, studying the impact of students' gender, native language, level of academic achievement, employment status, frequency and nature of library use, class year, perfectionism, and procrastination on library anxiety. They then expanded their work to particular populations, such as graduate students and international students.[9] In 2004, Doris J. Van Kampen proposed the Multidimensional Library Anxiety Scale, to be used with graduate students.[10]

Three recent examples show the diffusion of library anxiety research. Project Information Literacy in 2010's report *Truth Be Told*, while not specifically addressing library anxiety, described undergraduates' feelings of being overwhelmed at the beginning of a research project, hearkening back, once again, to Mellon.[11] Lesley Brown discussed reference librarians' attempts to diminish library anxiety in the context of the major changes in that service by 2011.[12] Eamon Tewell has recently complicated library anxiety in interesting ways, based on portrayals of libraries and library staff in two current television sitcoms, bringing in depictions of predatory staff behavior and the library's rule-orientation, inflexibility, and political power within city government.[13]

Mellon's article is still being cited for both the phenomenon and the method. Mellon stated that one of her goals in writing the article was to apply "rarely used methods of qualitative research to a library problem," and searching the databases of library and information science (LIS) reveals that she was indeed one of the early authors to use these methods.[14] The LISTA database shows 288 hits on "grounded theory" in the

library literature. None appeared before Mellon's article, but they continue to 2014. All "naturalistic inquiry" hits in LISTA are post-Mellon. Mellon's subsequent book, *Naturalistic Inquiry for Library Science,* has been cited over 200 times, according to Google Scholar.[15] Coediting a special issue of *Library Quarterly* in 1993 dedicated to qualitative research, Jana Bradley and Brett Sutton claimed, "The field has come relatively late to an awareness of qualitative research as it has been developing in sociology, psychology, anthropology, communication, education, and other social sciences," citing one paper from 1978, one from 1982, two from 1984, and one from 1986, in addition to Mellon's book.[16]

Qualitative methods from anthropology and sociology continue to be used in LIS. Several famous studies of recent years have employed these methods, including the University of Rochester's work published in *Studying Students*[17] and *Studying Students: A Second Look*.[18] Rochester's library actually has a full-time anthropologist on staff to help librarians understand the life-worlds of users. The ERIAL project (Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries) followed suit with two anthropologists coordinating studies at five colleges and universities in that state. Methods used in these studies included "semi-structured interviews, photo elicitation, participant observation in libraries, and mapping exercises, as well as other approaches."[19] Project Information Literacy, headquartered at the University of Washington's I-School, has published several major studies based on interviews of students.

Critique

In discussions of research methodology, it is important to distinguish between methods or techniques and the paradigmatic assumptions or epistemologies upon which methodologies rest. As Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom correctly noted, "ethnography (and qualitative work in general) is not a single method, nor is it characterized by a particular research strategy or paradigm. Rather it is composed of a variety of techniques for gathering data on human behavior and it is an oversimplification to associate these techniques with one overriding epistemological stance.… One of the most egregious misconceptions about qualitative research in general and ethnography in particular is that they necessarily represent an alternative to objectivist or positivist science."[20] Bradley and Sutton, in an excellent overview of the epistemologies underlying both "qualitative" and "quantitative" research (the labels are problematic, but here as elsewhere are used because they are the most common terms), explained that

> At the abstract end of the scale … qualitative research has origins in hermeneutics (the view that observation is an interpretive process), relativism (the theory that truth is contingent on the observer and the time and place of observation), and idealism (the view that reality is essentially a property of the mind rather than a phenomenon itself). These philosophical positions about the nature of reality and knowledge condition the methodological approach and the issues and techniques that arise in the context of these assumptions. This way of viewing qualitative research is variously referred to as the naturalistic, constructivist, or interpretive paradigm.[21]

And

> Quantitative research is often linked to philosophical traditions such as realism (the view that objects of sense impressions exist independently of the observer), logical positivism (the view that sense impressions alone are the most valid source of knowledge and that the factuality of propositions is based on those impres-

sions that can be verified), and empiricism (the claim that experience is the only process for gaining knowledge). Recurring ideas, or themes, associated with the quantitative paradigm include the assumption of one tangible reality, the effort to separate the observer from the thing observed (making objectivity possible), the temporal and contextual independence of observations, the assumption of linear causality, and the assumption of a value-free methodology.[22]

Mellon skirted clear of epistemological discussions, both in this article and in her book. Although she used the label "naturalistic" in her book, she was not using the word as most fully explicated by Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba in their famous text *Naturalistic Inquiry*, published a year before Mellon's article and five years before *Naturalistic Inquiry for Library Science*.[23] Mellon said that the purpose of naturalistic studies was to view "experiences from the perspective of those involved: patrons, librarians, administrators. The intent is to understand why people in a library setting behave as they do."[24] Lincoln and Guba contrasted incompatible positivist and naturalistic axioms about the nature of reality (the positivist paradigm [PP] sees reality as "single, tangible, and fragmentable" while the naturalist paradigm [NP] understands realities to be "multiple, constructed and holistic"), the relationship of the knower to the known (PP: the "knower and known are independent"; NP: the knower and known are interactive and inseparable), the possibility of generalization (PP: time- and context-free generalizations are possible; NP: only time- and context-bound working hypotheses are possible), and the role of values (PP: "inquiry is value-free" while NP: "inquiry is value-bound").[25] For Lincoln and Guba, techniques of research are of lesser importance and must be used in accordance with the axiomatic assumptions.

Jim Horn has helpfully contrasted phenomenology with "constructivist hermeneutics" as exemplified by Lincoln and Guba: "Whereas phenomenological description aims at a faithful description of the lived experience and is accomplished by a bracketing of the researcher's frame of reference, constructivist hermeneutics acknowledges the embedded nature of the researcher's frame as the beginning point in the process of coming to understand and interpret the phenomena under study."[26] Mellon was clearly in the phenomenological camp of her mentor, Robert Bogdan. Her definition of "naturalistic" does not challenge the assumption of an objective reality; it just particularizes it. Instead of describing libraries or library personnel in terms of general characteristics or beliefs, she said, naturalistic inquiry describes "real libraries."[27] In the article, Mellon emphasized the importance of understanding students' own perceptions of their academic library revealed in extensive samples of their own writing but held fast to other positivist assumptions, explaining twice that qualitative techniques are rigorous and invoking their "empirical" nature as well.[28] Where most qualitative projects focus on small numbers of respondents, studied in depth, Mellon used several writing samples from each of hundreds of students, creating a dataset whose scope bears more resemblance to a quantitative study. She maintained great distance between herself and her informants: the English instructors assigned and collected the personal writing samples from students over two years. Mellon did not reveal whether she ever met the students or interacted with them in any way. Mellon's role in the grant-funded project is likewise unclear. She is identified only as an assistant professor in the department of Library and Information Studies at East Carolina University, although she appears to have been working with instruction librarians, saying "*we* [emphasis added] began sharing our findings with supportive colleagues in the English department."[29] By masking her own experience and interests and minimizing her interaction with the study participants, she showed how entrenched in the positivist paradigm she remained, even while employing qualitative techniques. Thus, when Sandstrom

and Sandstrom, in their treatise endorsing scientific ethnography, lumped Mellon in with Lincoln and Guba because all three used the word "naturalistic," they were misunderstanding Mellon's purpose and misreading her work.[30]

Furthermore, Mellon advocated the practice of generating theory with qualitative research and testing it with quantitative methods. She cited the surprise that naturalistic techniques had delivered: "In this study, the original purpose of collecting data was to help find better ways to teach search strategy and tool use within the fifty-minute session allotted by the composition faculty. The intent was to use the findings to shed light on the increasing literature about how library instruction should be accomplished. It was discovered, however, that when asked about using the library for research, students did not discuss the problems they encountered with search. Instead, they discussed feelings of fear that kept them from beginning to search or that got in the way of their staying in the library long enough to master search processes."[31] It therefore makes sense to use qualitative methods to discover beliefs or ideas that would be difficult or impossible to get at or understand from, say, a survey, in which the researcher must anticipate possible responses when designing the instrument. Hence the appeal of grounded theory, a method in which data collection precedes theory creation, as the theory must emerge from the data. As Kathy Charmaz has noted, an advantage to grounded theory is its consonance with a positivist paradigm. Indeed, Charmaz has said that grounded theory is firmly rooted in positivism,[32] although Cathy Urquhart and Walter Fernández disagreed.[33] Within the positivist paradigm, then, once a grounded theory has been generated, it is good practice to devise a quantitative study to test the theory on a larger scale and refine it. This is just what Darlene Weingand recommended—"qualitative research can be utilized in conjunction with quantitative methods; in such a configuration, the qualitative process informs the experimental design. This arrangement satisfies those researchers who believe that only quantitative research yields rigorously verified hypotheses and results"[34]—and Bostick and Jiao and Onwuegbuzie did. From a strict constructivist or interpretivist paradigm, such as that represented by Lincoln and Guba, however, the entire qualitative-then-quantitative enterprise is suspect because the axioms on which they rest cannot be combined.

Mellon seems to have been a phenomenologist who was not questioning positivism. Even if she did have unstated leanings in that direction while trying to publish an early qualitative study in 1986, it is understandable if she thought she was going far enough. Even as recently as 2008 and 2012, Michael G. Pratt[35] and Robert D. Galliers and Jimmy C. Huang[36] reported perceptions of difficulty getting qualitative papers published in two other information-related fields, information systems and organization and management. Danny P. Wallace and Connie Van Fleet stated in 1998 that "the editorial process for journals in library and information science has tended to follow quantitative positivist research standards"[37] and offered advice to authors, editors, and reviewers dealing with reports of qualitative studies. Perhaps Mellon thought it unwise to submit her article with the aside, "Oh, by the way, there's no such thing as objective reality, and even if there were, we couldn't know it because we can't, as observers, get outside the thing we're observing." I would understand this perspective, and even sympathize, but what I find disappointing is that I see no evidence, from this article or her book, that she even considered the debate, which was certainly active in social science in the mid-1980s.

Future Directions

Bradley and Sutton in 1993 advocated that researchers be open about where they stand in the epistemological debate, "articulating the internal assumptions and rationale of the researcher's own traditions."[38] A comprehensive review of LIS studies that used

qualitative methods, to determine the extent to which researchers have complied, would be an interesting exercise.

To reread Mellon's article now is to be reminded just how much the tools of information-seeking have changed in thirty years and to realize anew what library users can accomplish regardless of their location. Mellon's construct of library anxiety was clearly rooted in a physical library. Students said they were overwhelmed by the size of the library and its unique features like "so many little [card catalog] drawers."[39] They were intimidated because they didn't know the location of the encyclopedias or how to find books. Excerpts from the students' papers regularly employed the phrase "use the library" as a synonym for "find information." These were the days when students' primary, even *only*, source of information was their campus library, and inability to use it well could spell the difference between academic success and failure.

Library anxiety still seems to be a valid construct. It has needed some updating, however, to continue to be relevant in vastly changed library and information environments. Writers since 1986 have expanded upon Mellon's findings by positing that library anxiety is distinct from research anxiety,[40] information anxiety,[41] or information-seeking anxiety.[42] In 1986, the goal was to overcome library anxiety so an affective barrier to academic success could be removed. Now, the more pressing need is to prove to students the continuing relevance of the library as an information source and encourage them to use resources not available on the open web, including consultations with librarians.

One of Mellon's prescriptions for reducing library anxiety in students was to make every library instruction session a "warmth seminar." She observed that the literature had had little to say about the importance of librarians being "warm, friendly, and approachable."[43] "In this session, our primary goal is to help students see the library as a great place, with fascinating information and warm, friendly people available to help them."[44] This emphasis continues to this day; I have heard so many aspiring information literacy librarians tell the hypothetical class they address in their sample lesson during a job interview, "The most important thing you can learn today is that librarians are here to help you," that I suspect the admonition to be friendly and approachable is standard fare in library schools these days. Authors are still advocating for training librarians to be welcoming and friendly.[45] Patricia Katopol, however, has warned that stereotype threat influences the choices students of color make when considering approaching a librarian; welcoming and friendly behavior from a librarian may not be perceived as intended.[46] An area that future researchers could profitably tackle is this: after all these years of "warmth seminars" and all the effort that seems to have gone into training librarians to be nice, is basic approachability still a problem?

Perhaps the situation is complicated in ways that Mellon could not have foreseen in 1986, by a much more diverse student body and a much more complex information universe. Continuing to study and document students' understandings of and attitudes toward the information-seeking expected of them in higher education should prove beneficial to librarians. Students in Mellon's study knew how reference librarians could benefit them, but they didn't feel worthy of a librarian's attention or were too embarrassed by their ignorance to ask for help. Brown assumed, in her 2011 article, that those conditions still applied.[47] But a new qualitative project has yielded another surprise: students in this study weren't intimidated by librarians or reluctant to lose face by approaching them; they simply had no idea why the librarians were there and what they were for.[48] Are we labeling as library anxiety phenomena that would more accurately be described as library ignorance or library indifference? It seems that these problems, if they indeed exist, might well have different solutions from those we've been applying to library anxiety.

Conclusion

When I learned that the editors of *College & Research Libraries* were planning a special 75th anniversary edition featuring groundbreaking articles originally published in the journal, I thought immediately of "Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development." I was delighted to see it on the list and honored to be chosen to write the companion essay. This article documented and named a phenomenon familiar to practicing librarians, inspired many researchers who went on to refine and extend the theory, and spurred the use of qualitative methods and respect for the lived experience of respondents. It richly deserves its placement in the 75th anniversary issue.

Notes

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23. Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1985).

24. Mellon, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 3.

25. Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 37.

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30. Sandstrom and Sandstrom, "The Use and Misuse of Anthropological Methods," 166.

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