Unmasking Whiteness: An Anti-Racist Approach to Reference Services

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What’s the problem?
Methods

Critical discourse analysis of Reference and User Services Association’s (RUSA):

◦ Guidelines for Behavioral Performance (2013)
Theory

Gusa’s White Institutional Presence (WIP):

◦ Monoculturalism, which is “the expectation that all individuals conform to one ‘scholarly’ worldview”.

◦ White blindness, which is an ideology that obscures or ignores White identity and privilege while simultaneously espousing the “neutral” concept of color blindness
3 themes

- Approachability
- Responsiveness
- & Neutrality/Objectivity
Approachability

Reference librarians are expected to “acknowledge patrons by using a friendly greeting to initiate conversation,”

-Guidelines for Behavioral Performance (RUSA, 2013)
Approachability

“What’s a smiling face when the whole state is racist?” – Chuck D

Photo by Jason Persse, retrieved from http://tinyurl.com/o2x5pbr
Responsiveness

A responsive librarian “determines the situational context of the individual information needs of users when interacting with each user in person or through another communication channel.”

-Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians (RUSA, 2003)
Dr. Geneva Gay’s Culturally Responsive Care is:

- Attention to individuals’ overall well-being and performance
- Active engagement that provokes reciprocity
- Actions that prompt effort and achievement
- Multidimensional responsiveness or understanding and responding to individuals’ cultural contexts

-Culturally responsive teaching: theory, research, and practice, 2010
Objectivity/Neutrality

Librarians should keep “a high degree of objective, non-judgmental interest” in patrons’ questions.

Do not “interject value judgments about the subject matter or the nature of the question into the transaction.”

-Guidelines for Behavioral Performance (RUSA, 2013)
Objectivity/Neutrality

“Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.”

– Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education*
Conclusions

Practical Suggestions:

- Revising guidelines to emphasize the need for reference workers to consider and act upon the historical context and power dynamics that shape racialized communication and racialized lives.
- Requiring reference staff to continuously develop cultural competencies relevant to themselves and their communities.
- Employing critical pedagogy practices in reference services in a manner that further develops anti-racist solidarities within the academic community.


