

# Unmasking Whiteness:

*An Anti-Racist Approach to Reference Services*

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What's the problem?

# Methods

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

- Guidelines for Behavioral Performance (2013)
- Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians (2003)

# Theory

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## 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

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- Approachability
- Responsiveness
- & Neutrality/Objectivity

# Approachability

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

-Guidelines for Behavioral Performance (RUSA, 2013)

# Approachability

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

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

# Responsiveness

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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)



# Culturally Responsive Care

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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

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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

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“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

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## 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.

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