

Sex Differences in Propensity to Ask for Library Reference Assistance

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Abstract

In contrast to cultural stereotype, men are more likely than women to seek help from reference librarians, according to a study of 112 library-patron interactions at the Main Library of The Ohio State University. The percentage of female patrons decreases as the day goes on. The percentage of male patrons is significantly higher with female librarians than male librarians.

Sex Differences in Propensity to Ask for Library Reference Assistance

The man who would drive aimlessly for hours rather than admit being lost and have to ask for directions has been a comedic staple for decades, as has been the sharp tongue of his less-obstinate wife. The question I have addressed in this research project is whether this cultural dichotomy of the do-it-yourself male and the humble female is accurate in describing the relative use of library reference help services. My hypothesis is that, as the cultural stereotype would predict, females will be over-represented as a proportion of reference help desk users. (For the purpose of analyzing the results of this survey, I will assume that the male/female ratio of library patrons equals the 49% male / 51% female ratio of OSU-Columbus students.)

Method

Subjects

The site I used to collect data was the main reference desk on the first floor of the OSU Main Library. The subjects were the reference librarians on duty and the patrons who came to them for assistance during my hours of observation. None of the subjects were aware of my research.

Apparatus

My observation records were kept in a spiral reporter's notebook, which I divided into four columns: sex of the patron, sex of the librarian, starting time of

the assistance (rounded to the minute), and ending time of the assistance (rounded to the minute). I also wrote the hour and date at the top of each page.

Later, I entered the data into a Minitab 10.51 worksheet for statistical analysis. This worksheet also had four data columns: sex of the patron, sex of the librarian, length (in minutes) of the assistance, and time of day (morning, afternoon, or evening).

Procedure

I spent eight hours (two morning, four afternoon, and two evening) during the week of May 18-24 recording the gender of each patron who requested help at the desk, as well as the gender of the librarian and the amount of time that each request required. The number of contacts recorded was 112 (29 morning, 52 afternoon, and 31 evening). I was seated at a table several feet directly behind the reference desk, giving me a complete field of vision to watch the reference desk. My vantage point also kept my observation unnoticed, because the librarians (whose backs were to me) could see neither my frequent glances at the desk nor my subsequent data recording.

Results

Of the 112 observed contacts between patrons and reference librarians, 65 (58.0%) involved male patrons and 47 (42.0%) involved female patrons (see Tables 1 and 2). There was not a significant difference in the length of the contact – the female mean was 2.0 minutes and the male mean was 1.6 minutes, while the median for both sexes was 1 minute. The male/female ratio of patrons increased as the day went on, rising from 55/45 in the morning to 61/39 in the evening (see Table 3).

The sex of the librarian had a marked effect on the male/female ratio of the patrons (see Tables 4 and 5). Male librarians faced a 50/50 ratio of male and female patrons; female librarians faced a 60/40 ratio.

Discussion

The results of the study refuted my hypothesis that women would be more likely to seek help than men. The difference in the sex ratios faced by male and female librarians certainly deserves further study – first, to see whether it exists in other studies; and, if so, second, to see what causes it.

The basic methodology of the study is sound, but increasing the number of hours of observation, especially in the morning and the evening, and increasing the time spent observing male reference librarians would increase the validity of the results. The study could also be improved by being conducted by a researcher whose statistical reference works were not in packing boxes. Finally, a comparison of the results of the Columbus study and the results of a similar study at the libraries of Biarritz and St. Tropez might prove fruitful, and I will be applying for funding for this important work.

Tables

	Male	Female	Total
Morning	16	13	29
Afternoon	30	22	52
Evening	19	12	31
Total	65	47	112

Table 1: Research patrons, classified by sex and time of visit (by number)

	Male	Female	Total
Morning	14.3	11.6	25.9
Afternoon	26.8	19.6	46.4
Evening	17.0	10.7	27.7
Total	58.0	42.0	100.

Table 2: Research patrons, classified by sex and time of visit (by percentage)

	Male	Female
Morning	55.2	44.8
Afternoon	57.7	42.3
Evening	61.3	38.7
Total	58.0	42.0

Table 3: Effect of time of day on sex ratio of patrons (by percentage)

	Male	Female	Total
Male patron	12	53	65
Female patron	12	35	47
Total	24	88	112

Table 4: Effect of sex of librarian on sex of patron (by number)

	Male	Female
Male librarian	50	50
Female librarian	60	40

Table 5: Effect of sex of librarian on sex of patron (by percentage)