**Type of Contribution: PAPER**

**What Does it Mean to be a Special Librarian in the Digital Age?**

**Exploring Identity and Experience**

**Keywords: special librarians, reference and information service, interpretative phenomenological analysis**

# Introduction

Defining “special librarianship” has always been a challenge, as special librarians work in such diverse environments with diverse clientele. To compound this problem, special librarianship has experienced dramatic change in recent years with an increasingly global society, the need to justify value to their organizations, and an increased focus on competitive intelligence and knowledge management. How have these changes affected the meaning of special librarianship? And how have they changed special librarians’ identity and their perspective on their work?

This study explores one aspect of the work special librarians, their information interactions with clients, more generally referred to as reference and information service (RIS). This specific focus ignores other key roles, such as developing collections, maintaining facilities, and managing staff. However, it allows for in-depth exploration of one of the key roles for special librarians.

Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this study explores the experience of information service for eight librarians from diverse special libraries in Slovenia and the United States. IPA studies reveal commonalities and differences of experience, and as such, the study will help to articulate the participants’ common identity as “special librarians”. Articulating the experience of contemporary special librarianship will benefit professional associations that serve these librarians and professional education that prepares librarians for their careers.

**Research questions**

The aim of the study is to articulate the experience of reference and information service for special librarians, exploring both similarities and differences of experience for this diverse group. Similarities and differences across disciplines and cultures will also be explored. The guiding research questions for the study are

* What is the experience of reference and information service for these librarians?
* Do themes of experience differ by discipline of the library or by country?
* What commonalities of RIS lived experience may contribute to understanding the identity of special librarians?

**Literature review**

There is limited research on special librarians as a group. The research tends to focus on specific types of libraries, such as law librarians (Slinger & Slinger, 2015) or art librarians (Tewell, 2012).

Research on the special librarian/client relationship and the unique aspects that this may bring to RIS work is scarce. There is acknowledgement that RIS is an important role for special librarians, both historically and contemporarily. In 1964, for instance, Anders categorized the information services provided in special libraries and described ways in which they are distinctive in comparison to other library environments, such as “lack of emphasis on the teaching function”, and “presence of time pressure” (p 397-398). More recently, Ard and Livingstone (2013) identified core RIS skills for special librarians: the reference interview, research, giving the client more than they asked for, and current awareness. In adopting their six Competencies for Information Professionals, the Special Libraries Association affirmed the continuing importance of RIS by including “information and knowledge services” as a competency (Special Libraries Association, 2016). Tatum (2017) found that skills relating to information services, education and research were one of the two skillsets special librarians are most responsible for on a daily basis. 77% of special librarians said these skills were needed in their current position – higher than others like administration, access and collections, and information technology (p. 66)

**Methodology**

IPA was chosen as the method for the study as it interprets the experience of participants and also exposes commonalities and differences between them (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009; VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). This method is increasingly being used in library and information science research (for example, Gorichanaz, 2017; Mat Saat, Hepworth & Jackson, 2018) and has been used in several studies of the experience of reference and information service for librarians (VanScoy, 2013; VanScoy & Bright, 2017).

*Participants*

Participants for this study were eight special librarians for whom reference and information service is an important part of their work responsibilities. The librarians worked in a number of disciplinary libraries (agriculture, biotechnology, humanities, and pharmacy), and each had at least two years of experience providing RIS. There were four women and four men. Four of the participants were from Slovenia, and four from the United States. Eight participants is considered an appropriate number of participants for IPA studies, due to the in-depth, interpretive nature of the studies (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009).

*Context*

Participants for this study are drawn from two countries, Slovenia and the United States – countries that have distinct systems of libraries. Slovenia has a centralized and well-organized national library system. Zveza Bibliotekarskih Društev Slovenije, the Slovenian Special Library Association, has a Special Libraries Section. This section is responsible for professional development of the field in Slovenia. It organises workshops, lectures, and annual conferences. The section is responsible for updating standards for special libraries is Slovenia. In 2018 there were 128 special libraries: 41 in cultural institutions, 56 (industry, science, health institutions), 19 in governmental organisation, and 12 in other categories. There are 151 special librarians in Slovenia (Center za razvoj knjižnic – CeZaR, 2018).

The United States has a less uniform system of libraries with variations by state. The relevant professional organization in the United States is the Special Library Association that hosts an annual conference, publishes a journal, offers training and certificates, and sponsors research. As of the end of 2018, the association had over 4,000 members (Special Libraries Association, 2018). In addition, there are associations that focus on specific types of special libraries, such as the American Association of Law Libraries. There are 5,150 special libraries (American Library Association, 2018) in the United States according to the *American Library Directory*. However, there are no statistics for the number of special librarians employed in the United States.

*Data collection*

After obtaining ethical clearance, the authors met with each participant for a one-hour, semi-structured interview that was audio recorded and transcribed. English was the primary language for the study; however, some participants occasionally spoke in Slovene and one of the authors translated.

*Data analysis*

Following typical IPA procedures, interview data for each participant will be analysed separately. First, exploratory comments are made about the data – these comments may be descriptive, linguistic, or conceptual. Next, the interview data and exploratory comments are analysed together to develop emergent themes for the participant. Finally, the emergent themes are analysed thematically to develop superordinate themes for the participant. Analysis attempts to move from the simply descriptive, to the interpretive. Once each individual’s data is analysed, master themes will be developed for the entire group. The analysis is ongoing and will be completed before the LIDA conference in May.

**Preliminary Results & Discussion**

To provide a sense of what to expect from the results of the analysis, the superordinate themes for one participant are presented here. The superordinate themes for Marija, a special librarian in Slovenia, are

* Toward a common goal
* More of a good thing
* Information behaviour expertise
* Subject area expertise
* Facilitating and interacting
* Focus and concentration
* Learning and collaboration

In the RIS area of her work, Marija is strongly focused on the user’s end goal. She makes herself indispensable to the users in her organization, so that they return to work with her in the future. She relies on her expert knowledge in her subject area and her expert knowledge of user needs to meet clients’ needs. In her RIS work, Marija describes herself as both a “facilitator” as she interacts with users through collaborating, explaining, communicating and teaching and also as an “information professional” as she works alone to search for the “small but critical information” that helps her users achieve their end goals. This solitary searching requires concentration and focus to be successful.

Marija’s focus on the users’ end goal is an example of action called for by Matarazzo and Pearlstein (2013, 2015). They recommended special libraries align their goals more closely with those of their parent organization to ensure their relevance and survival. It is interesting to note Marija’s perception that her information behaviour expertise is critical to her work. In their review of RIS competency documents in the United States, Hicks & VanScoy (2019) found that information behaviour expertise was rarely mentioned by professional associations, with the except of the Medical Libraries Association and to some extent, the Special Libraries Association. The value Marija places on her information behaviour expertise supports the notion that this expertise may be more highly valued by special librarians.

**Conclusion**

The themes developed from this study will further understanding of the experience of RIS for special librarians from two distinctive cultures. When all participants’ data are analysed, their commonalities of experience will help articulate the experience of RIS for special librarians, contributing to an understanding based on their commonalities, rather than their distinction from other types of librarians. While RIS encompasses only a portion of a special librarians’ responsibility, it remains a key role. These results will provide insight in the participants’ role identity as RIS providers and their professional identity as special librarians. The findings will articulate the experience of contemporary special librarianship, benefitting professional associations that serve these librarians and professional education that prepares these librarians.

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