

Library Conversations: Reclaiming Interpersonal Communication Theory for Understanding Professional Encounters, Edited by Marie L. Radford and Gary P. Radford, Chicago. IL, Neal-Schuman, 2017, 182 pp., \$75.00, ISBN: 978-0-8389-1484-7

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Abstract:

In six chapters and a brief conclusion, the authors of this volume explore one-on-one “conversations” in various library settings, either in person or in other contexts such as online chat interactions. The volume begins rather philosophically, evoking Aristotle, John Locke, and other thinkers on the subject of communication. The authors reject a “transmission framework” to define communication, and thus conversations, because it lacks the psychological/psychiatric dimension found in such interactions. The authors basically anchor their research on the ideas of Erving Goffman and two other works—*Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry* (1968) by Jurgen Ruesch and Gregory Bateson, and *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (1967) by Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson.

Keywords: book review | reference interview | libraries

Article:

In six chapters and a brief conclusion, the authors of this volume explore one-on-one “conversations” in various library settings, either in person or in other contexts such as online chat interactions. The volume begins rather philosophically, evoking Aristotle, John Locke, and other thinkers on the subject of communication. The authors reject a “transmission framework” to define communication, and thus conversations, because it lacks the psychological/psychiatric dimension found in such interactions. The authors basically anchor their research on the ideas of Erving Goffman and two other works—*Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry* (1968) by Jurgen Ruesch and Gregory Bateson, and *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (1967) by Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson.

Following the theoretical presentation of conversational interactions, including a discussion of “face” and “face-work,” Part 2 of the volume covers the topic of *Applying Theory to Reference Encounters*. Chapter 5 presents an excellent analysis of an actual online reference encounter, depicting how the interaction between the librarian and the library patron goes astray, due in large part to the poor “relational dimension” of the event. The authors stress the many aspects of the relational dimension (in a face-to-face setting) throughout this work: “posture, eye-gaze, the intonation of the voice, distance, touch, facial expression, and so on” (p. 110). Chapter 6 presents a detailed model of the content transfer and relational dimensions of these library encounters, using a detailed diagram (p. 106) and more useful sample chat transcripts.

These authors, one a professor of library science and the other a professor of communication studies, have clearly explored the aspects of this subject for a long time. In fact, the reference lists in two of the chapters include 12 other works by the authors. Much of the thought in this volume grows out of Marie Radford’s important book *The Reference Encounter* (ACRL, 1999), which is grounded in her doctoral work and focused on the academic library setting. This volume offers its readers a broader study, with patrons ranging from middle schoolers to adults. The goal of this work is summarized well in a quotation from Jaime La Rue: “The skill that matters most in reference is communication.” (p. 3)

All libraries which serve people interested in, or involved with, libraries—public, school, corporate, or academic—or library schools will find this volume quite useful as they seek to enhance the “reference interview” process, in all its possible incarnations, for current or future patrons. (It does seem to this reviewer that the price for a 182-page paperback, published by an American Library Association publisher, is higher than it need be, given the budget struggles that many libraries face in today’s world.)