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Using Phenomenological Interviewing to Learn from Underserved User Communities

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Two separate research studies

- How do first-generation students describe making sense of what is expected of them in terms of selecting a topic and satisfactorily finding, evaluating, and using information for academic research assignments?
 - Amanda Folk
- How do Black/African-American students attending a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the Midwest describe their experiences with libraries and library staff, both before and during college?
 - Amanda Folk & Tracey Overbey

Gaps in our professional knowledge

First-generation college students & information literacy

- Existing LIS research lacked theoretical or conceptual foundations that links the development of information literacy to research in higher education more generally.
- Typically examined students' information literacy at a particular point in time, often disconnected from an actual assignment.
 - Asked students to talk about their approach to research generally as opposed to how they approached a particular assignment or
 - Focused specifically on how they used (or did not use) library resources.

Gaps in our professional knowledge

Black/African-American college students

- Discussion of persistent racial achievement gaps in American higher education has been mostly absent in existing LIS literature.
- Existing LIS literature primarily relied upon survey data and indicated that Black/African-American students did not use libraries differently (for the most part) than their peers.
- Not much research about how Black/African-American college students experience libraries or interact with library professionals (who are primarily white).

We don't know how students whose identities have traditionally been marginalized in higher education navigate spaces, practices, and services that were historically not designed for them.

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Phenomenological interviewing

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What is phenomenology?

- The primary purpose is to understand the experience of a phenomenon, rather than focusing on the individuals experiencing the phenomenon.
 - The phenomenological question asks what it is like to experience a particular phenomenon.
- Hermeneutic phenomenology is both...
 - Descriptive – seeks to describe, to the extent possible, individuals' reflections on experiencing a phenomenon – and...
 - Interpretive – “seeks to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience” with a phenomenon (van Manen, 1990, p. 41).

What is phenomenological interviewing?

Primary purpose is “understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 9).

Three-interview series structure:

- Focused life history
 - Place the “participant’s experience in context by asking [them] to tell as much as possible about [themselves] in light of the topic up to the present” (p. 21)
- Details of experience
 - “Concentrate on the concrete details of the participants’ present lived experience” with the phenomenon of study (p. 21)
- Reflection on meaning
 - Participants reflect on the meaning of their experience with the phenomenon, including “intellectual and emotional connections” (p. 22)

What are the benefits?

Addressing gaps in our LIS research and literature!

First-generation students & information literacy

- Examining the longitudinal development of information literacy through experience with research assignments without conducting a longitudinal study.

Black/African American college students & library experiences

- Focusing on the quality of the experiences and interactions, not just the usage, and how past experiences with libraries and librarians may inform current and future usage of spaces and services.

Phenomenological interviewing In practice

First-generation college students' experiences with research assignments

60 to 75-minute semi-structured interviews with...

- 30 first-generation college students
- between the ages of 18 and 24, who were
- in at least their 3rd year of college
- and enrolled full time
- at one of two regional campuses of a major research university.

First-generation college students experiences with research assignments

The interview protocol was divided into four sections:

- Students' background & experience transitioning to college
- Discussion of first research assignment experience
- Discussion of most recent (or current) research assignment experience
- Comparison and reflection on experiences with research assignments as they transitioned into and within college

First-generation college students experiences with research assignments

Key Findings

- Two different transition experiences and strategies emerged based on how well students could transfer what they learned in high school to college
 - Insight into how students accumulated social capital and developed relationships with faculty
- The perception that faculty value final product over process
- The potential role that motivation and personal investment play in the development of information literacy
 - Identity-conscious and asset-based pedagogies could play an important role in developing students' information literacy while also taking inclusivity into account.

Black/African American college students' experiences with libraries

60-minute semi-structured interviews with...

- 15 Black/African-American college students
- who are enrolled full time
- at predominantly white, research-intensive university.

Black/African American college students' experiences with libraries

The interview protocol was divided into four sections:

- Students' background & initial thoughts about libraries and librarians
- Discussion experiences with libraries before college
- Discussion of experiences with college library
- Reflection on the role of race in their library experiences

Black/African American college students' experiences with libraries

Key Findings

- Race seemed to play an important role in students' pre-college library interactions, particularly with white public librarians
 - Possible evidence of implicit bias
- Very little to no engagement with academic librarians, despite reports of frequent use of public libraries prior to college
- Implications for the pipeline into the profession for Black/African-American students
 - If they are being treated differently by white librarians when they are young, they may not believe that they would belong in our profession

Why are these findings important?

- Depending on the phenomenon, the data may help to develop much-needed theory or conceptual models.
- Provides us with the opportunity to listen to our users, particularly those that may not be well-represented in our professional ranks, to learn about their experiences and how they make meaning of those experiences.
- Provides a more holistic and nuanced portrait of users' experiences, allowing us to think about how prior experiences with library-related services, programs, or spaces may affect present or future (non-)use.

More in-depth look at our research studies

First-generation college students study

Folk, A.L. (2018). Drawing on students' funds of knowledge: Using identity and lived experience to join the conversation in research assignments. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 12(2), 44-59. <https://go.osu.edu/folk2018jil>

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Folk, A.L. (forthcoming). Conceptualizing the sociocultural nature of the development of information literacy in undergraduate education. In T. Schlak, S. Corral, & P. Bracke, *The Social Future of Academic Libraries*. London: Facet Publishing.

More in-depth look at our research studies

Black/African-American college students study

Folk, A.L., & Overbey, T. (2019). Narratives of (dis)engagement: Exploring Black/African-American undergraduate students' experiences with libraries. *Association of College & Research Libraries 2019 Conference*, Cleveland, OH. <https://go.osu.edu/acrl2019paper>

Folk, A.L., & Overbey, T. (2019, August). Getting from summer reading programs to library school: Thinking about the professional pipeline through the library experiences of Black/African-American students. *Advancing Inclusivity, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility in Libraries & Archives (IDEAL) Conference*. Columbus, OH. <https://go.osu.edu/idealpipeline>

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Thank you! ☺

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#BuckeyesGive to Families in Cleveland

<https://www.osu.edu/O-H-I-O/122772>

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Seidman, I. (2009). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.