

## **Integrating Critical Theory Into Library Community Assessment and Service Planning**

The School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is requesting \$306,223 for a three-year Laura Bush 21<sup>st</sup> Century Early Career grant to study integration of critical theoretical approaches into library community assessment. This study works to build applied theory (and a set of tools/materials) that will result in improved approaches to assessing the needs of and serving marginalized groups in local communities in general, and members of the Autism community, specifically. The study asks the following research questions:

1. Does employing a rich, critical model of information poverty change library service and program planning? Does more explicit consideration of the concepts of voice, representation, and equity improve assessment and service planning for people with disabilities? What are the implications for other marginalized groups?
2. To what extent do libraries currently identify and reach out to marginalized populations within their local communities? If so, how do they determine what expertise exists within these populations?
3. What information values, social norms, needs, and specialized knowledge exist in local communities of people with ASD? What local information systems (human and ICT) support the information needs of marginalized communities?

**Need:** Individuals with disabilities comprise a huge portion of the U.S. population; 1 in 5 Americans has a disability (CDC, 2015). In North Carolina, 1 in 58 children has Autism Spectrum Disorder (CDC, 2014). The increasing scope of community for individuals with ASD means an increased need for information about raising a child with ASD (for parents) in the local community, services and information for people with ASD, and better approaches to assessing and serving the needs of people with ASD in local communities (for libraries). Libraries have begun to do the work necessary to provide basic services to people with ASD, but explicit incorporation of concepts such as *voice* (consciously engaging the perspectives, values, and experiences of a marginalized group, and questioning those inherent in our own), *representation* (visual, conceptual, and value-based presence of the group in assessment and planning), and *equity* (focusing on elimination of disparity as an outcome, rather than on providing equal services to all) (Braveman & Gruskin, 2003; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006) hold potential for improving the way libraries provide services to people with disabilities, and to other marginalized groups. A study (survey and interview) of 931 parents of individuals with disabilities in North Carolina conducted as part of a needs assessment for the proposed project found that many parents feel excluded from the library, and viewed the library as designed to meet the needs of “typical” families. Survey data showed that out of thirteen given information sources, the library ranked consistently as the least popular source of information (avg. 3.24% over all topics). As a point of comparison, other local organizations (25.58%) and other parents of people with ASD (28.08%) were among other non-internet source choices. The library also received low scores for ASD-friendly local activities (2.84%). Where some library staff perceived themselves as providing services without regard for ability (an ability-blind approach), many parents perceived their local libraries as ignoring their families’ needs. Critical examinations of current approaches to service planning for this population are necessary if libraries are to maintain relevance for this group. As with any theory development, findings have implications beyond the specific contexts of the proposed study. Development of models for assessment and planning for this diverse community also has implications for assessment and planning for other marginalized groups. This project would form the basis for a continued body of work on information poverty, place, and local community assessment among various groups.

**Project Personnel.** The PI for the proposed project will be Dr. Amelia N. Gibson, Assistant Professor at the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Gibson received her A.B. from Dartmouth College (2002), and her MLIS (2007) and Ph.D. (2013) from Florida State University. Dr. Gibson’s research focuses on the influence of intersections of place, community, and identity (dis/ability, race, gender) on information behavior and access. Her recent work has focused on families of individuals with disabilities, and how trust, power and privilege inform their access to information and information practices. Her works, including *Emerging role of public librarians as E-government providers*, and

*A better place? Factors in community assessment for parents of children with Down syndrome*, have focused on developing rich structural social models/theories of information science that inform practice and education. The proposed Early Career project would further Dr. Gibson's work on developing richer theoretical and empirical models of communities as social and information systems, understanding the influence of identity and place on the development of those systems, and developing practical tools for applying that knowledge in community organizations. Dr. Gibson teaches Human Information Interactions, Information Ethics, and Local Contexts and Information Behaviors at the UNC School of Information and Library Science (SILS). The Autism Society of North Carolina (ASNC) and the Durham Public library have agreed to serve as project partners. Partners will assist with recruiting participants, training library staff, and will serve coordinators for community events. John Bertot (University of Maryland) and Sandra Hughes-Hassell (UNC Chapel Hill) have agreed to serve as research mentors for this project. Additionally, the PI is a member of the North Carolina Autism Alliance, an inter-agency workgroup organized by the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities (workgroup meets quarterly).

**Activities & Goals:** The proposed community based participatory study (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006) aligns with the IMLS 2012-2016 IMLS Strategic Plan Learning and Community goals (IMLS, 2012). Project activities are focused in the following three areas:

**Goal #1 Development of a preliminary theoretical model of information poverty among marginalized groups in local communities, and an empirical model of information needs and expertise among people with ASD in local communities.** The PI will develop a theoretical model for community assessment that engages critical literatures and concepts. The model will contribute to research in assessment of place-based communities and local library services.

**Goal #2: Development of a process model and for identifying, understanding, and exchanging knowledge with marginalized groups in local communities.** Collaborative documentation of the assessment process during year 1 will provide data for development of a model for community assessment, to be tested and further developed during years 2 and 3 of the project. Final outcomes will include a toolkit for libraries interested in more inclusive assessment processes.

**Goal #3: Creation of a toolkit that helps librarians understand issues of intersectional inclusion in libraries, including explicit definition, discussion, and incorporation of critical concepts.** The participatory program planning process will integrate the autism community into planning programs. The PI will also use surveys and focus groups to examine explicit incorporation of *voice*, *representation*, and *equity* as concepts in community planning and assessment.

**Impact:** The following impacts are expected from the proposed study:

- 1. Contribution to theoretical knowledge about information poverty (Chatman, 1996), trust and disclosure in communities among marginalized groups.**
- 2. Contribution to practical knowledge about inclusion, equity, and practical application of critical theory into library community assessment and service planning.**
- 3. Collection of evidence-based, field-tested materials for institutions seeking to complete a community expertise exchange in their own communities or with a specific group.**

Research outcomes will be publicized through conference presentations (e.g. *ASIST-Information Behavior/Ethics and Policy Track*; *ISIC*) and publication (e.g. *Library Quarterly*; *JASIST*; *LISR*); and data and materials will be made available through a public website hosted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

**Budget Summary** (see Budget Narrative for further detail). The estimated budget for this project is \$306,223. This includes \$67,904 for 3 years of PI summer support; \$146,112 for 3 years of doctoral graduate assistant support (including tuition and fringe benefits); \$15,461 for travel to research sites for data collection and for research dissemination ; \$1500 for supplies (printing, program materials); \$17,789 for independent contractors who will provide Autism-related basic skills training to library staff over the three-year period, and advisory board stipends; \$2,595 for participant incentives; \$6000 for SILS IT costs (this covers IT support and a percentage of software licensing/support fees).