

# Sex, Brains, and Video Games

Information and Inspiration  
for Youth Services Librarians

**SECOND EDITION**

JENNIFER BUREK PIERCE



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# Introduction

**T**he first edition of this book began ten years ago. Following an Urban Libraries Council conference in Chicago, where I learned about innovative work on adolescence in cognitive science and sociology, I began to refer to those theories of development in my popular and scholarly writing. These articles were regarded as the first ones in library and information science (LIS) to acknowledge the work of pioneering researchers like Jay Giedd, whose findings reshaped paradigms used to explain the maturation processes that play out during the teen years. As interest in that emerging brain research grew, I was asked to write the book that became *Sex, Brains, and Video Games: A Librarian's Guide to Teens in the Twenty-First Century*, and ten years later, evolving research and other developments prompt its revision. Key concepts, including the history of young adult services and the nature of research on adolescence and U.S. adolescents, preface a fuller explanation of prevailing themes in our encounters with teens.

Although much has happened since the first decade of the twenty-first century, I have the good fortune to

remain the audience for the stories of students and graduates who work in youth services. Despite laments for those whose passion for working with teens has been confounded by combative library administrations, others acknowledge myriad difficulties and even bad days before rushing forward to realize their visions and plans. They tell me about their strategies for ensuring teens whose financial circumstances might jeopardize their access to library resources can use computers and collaborate—or even just socialize—with friends in teen spaces. They renew their collection management strategies to ensure teens can find graphic novels and pursue new possibilities in makerspaces. They propose programs that facilitate teens’ abilities to communicate directly with community leaders. They share information in conversations with teens, even if there is a poster with that same information on a wall three feet behind them. They know whatever they do, they will need to revisit their assumptions, make new connections, and renew their efforts with each new cohort of young people. These librarians, so full of commitment and energy, are awesome and inspiring. They are also, according to one historical interpretation of the field, positioned at the beginning of the second century of young adult library services in this country.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the research that was beginning to offer distinctive conclusions about adolescence has gained explanatory power and depth. Where there was much curiosity about better understanding the teen brain, these days one can find defensive, even angry, critiques of the empirical research that has sought to better understand how teens change during puberty and adolescence. Then, we had a handful of articles that encouraged awareness of the complexities of gender identity, and now we witness both significant advances in LGBTQ rights and adamant political opposition. Many dynamics, whether the result of research, technology, or social change, encourage a new look at contemporary adolescence.

At the opening of the 2016 Public Library Association conference, Sari Feldman observed that libraries “are a lifeline for people at every key transition in their lives.”<sup>2</sup> Adolescence represents one of these critical times in a life, a transition with much importance and potential. While some advocates for teens have argued that LIS should create its own concept of this stage rather than relying on extant models

of adolescent development, there are multiple realities in play.<sup>3</sup> One is that teens are minors, not yet adults, in the U.S. legal system that governs their rights. Regardless of librarians' respect, teens may be subject to municipal curfews and other restrictions or oversight, and these laws factor into their relationships with the library. In most states, their education is compulsory, rather than voluntary, well into the teen years; Arizona, Vermont, and Wyoming allow students to leave school soonest, once pupils reach age sixteen or complete tenth grade.<sup>4</sup> Their legal status also affects their relationships with their parents or guardians, despite whatever privacy library policies afford their reference questions and circulation transactions. Declarations that some teens are more mature than 30-year-olds, however true in individual cases, matter little in these contexts.<sup>5</sup> Further, the number of studies showing that teens with strong support from their families fare better both during adolescence and after is increasing. Many conditions suggest the value of a shared understanding of what it means to be an adolescent, considered broadly rather than from a narrow, discipline-specific construct.

One reason to think about what researchers in cognate fields know about teens lies in our own field's renewed attention to community engagement and partnerships. As we work with others to make teens welcome in our libraries and connected to our communities, interdisciplinary knowledge, specifically a thorough, contemporary understanding of adolescence supported by research from fields like education, sociology, and communication, should guide our approach to this time of change in a young person's life. This book supports librarians' efforts to gain familiarity with those ideas.

## **THE PURPOSE OF YOUNG ADULT SERVICES, THEN AND NOW**

When we provide library services to young adults, we aspire to two fundamental objectives: to engage adolescents through meaningful and appealing responses to their recreational and informational needs, and to support good outcomes for young people as their roles change. This dual purpose creates a balancing act for library professionals

as we try to figure out what teens want while making what they need available too, not unlike the complications of welcoming them into library spaces while preserving a level of decorum that allows other patrons their own uses of the library. These aims may appear straightforward, reflecting a commonsense approach to serving young people, and many advocates of youth services have long espoused them. Think of Samuel S. Green's description of youth services when he wrote in 1879, "I would also have in every library a friend of the young, whom they can consult freely when in want of assistance, and who, in addition to the power of gaining their confidence, has knowledge and tact enough to render them real aid in making selections."<sup>6</sup> Mary K. Chelton has observed that in 1917 the New York Public Library (NYPL) hired a librarian to respond to the needs of young people "who were aging out of children's services, but who were often not yet well-served by the library's adult services units."<sup>7</sup> These are two instances of the profession's openness to teens, signals that despite the all-too-easy-to-find historical statements that disparaged adolescents, some leaders looked for a way to respond to young adults' distinctive needs. What it means, on the one hand, to make the library a welcoming environment for teens, while on the other, to help them assume adult roles, has varied considerably over time. A quick glance at the profession's past offers examples of librarians' ideas about youth services that contrast starkly with our own, as well as similarities to our present ideals.

We can find evidence that in the earliest years of the profession, librarians were concerned that their young patrons read too much and wanted the wrong sorts of books. Their views, distinctive for critiques that seem unbelievable now, represented one perspective on library services to teens. The 1879 complaints of librarian Mary A. Bean against young people's "craze for books" and "indiscriminate reading" were as laudable to her contemporaries as they are laughable to us.<sup>8</sup> Bean's concerns, though, were very much congruent with the thinking of her time, which represented the early years of both librarianship and psychology. To Bean and other professionals, adolescents were sometimes trying but not unsympathetic individuals

who could be encouraged to give up romances or adventure stories, moving from questionable books to an appreciation of the classics that showed real discernment. According to this school of thought, teens were unformed but educable, barring the influence of the wrong sorts of peers, whether in person or on the page.

There were serious concerns that frivolous or racy books would derail young people's futures in this life and damn them in the next. In 1895, George Cole warned librarians that

nowadays a child who can read will read; and if we do not lead and direct his taste, the enemy, who is ever lying in wait for poor, faltering humanity, will give the child abundant opportunity of the knowledge of evil; and this evil, whose knowledge is death to the soul of every pure boy or girl, is crowding us at every corner of life.<sup>9</sup>

These pronouncements encouraged late nineteenth-century librarians working with young people to bear a rather weighty responsibility for their patrons' futures. Teens were regarded as poor judges of their own recreational reading matter, and librarians became their protectors against books that hinted at real-world dangers. Librarians strove to shape young minds in preparation for adult lives and careers, much as their contemporaries in Progressive Era reform intended to improve society. When the first full-length book on adolescent psychology appeared in the early twentieth century, the author of *Adolescence* became a prominent speaker at library and education conferences, cautioning librarians and teachers about the harm that could result from young people's reading habits. Although he also urged adults to remember their own adolescent years and empathize with teens, writers today tend to focus on his dramatic pronouncements about what could go wrong during the teen years.

Amid these fears, there were hints of change. Although librarians lacked the professional nomenclature that now distinguishes teens from children, there was discussion of how the needs of adolescents differed from the very young. At the same time that many librarians writing for the early *Library Journal*, which was then the name of



ALA's magazine, objected vociferously to books with stories that depicted lives and actions that seemed improbable—a teen's ability to take charge of a runaway train or a romance that promised luxury instead of hard work—others did not. Historians examining actual library records from this era have found something surprising in light of these well-publicized complaints about teens' reading habits. While it seems likely that many librarians did censor their collections, several recent historical studies reveal ample evidence that contested authors like Horatio Alger, Oliver Optic, and others were part of libraries' collections.<sup>10</sup> In other words, as some librarians loudly condemned certain authors as inappropriate, others quietly circulated what people, including adolescents, wanted to read.

Our belief in the value of leisure reading, freely chosen, has these and other historical antecedents. Teens' rights to access a wide range of materials are declared in documents as old as the 1953 Freedom to Read Statement and, more recently, ALA opposition to legislation like the Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006 (H.R. 5319, 109th Cong.) and subsequent efforts to limit access to online content. Declarations that young people as well as adults have the right to read and view a wide range of materials, according to their interests rather than their ages, are mirrored in another proclamation of readers' rights that includes the "right to skip pages" and the "right not to finish."<sup>11</sup> A plethora of policy statements commit us to collections that serve young people in meaningful, expansive ways, and we are joined in this endeavor by peer professional organizations and individuals, like the Office for Intellectual Freedom, the National Council of Teachers of English, and authors from Judy Blume to John Green, who support librarians and educators facing materials challenges.<sup>12</sup> We've shifted over the years from emphatic statements about the imperative of safeguarding teens to ensuring their access to a brave new world of information and entertainment resources, with respect for the young person's growing autonomy as she creates an independent and newly adult identity.

The professional literature in our journals and magazines extends this theme in other directions. There are expressions of concern

about incursions against young people's rights to privacy: Should parents be able to review library records to see what books their child has borrowed? Does this change when fines or replacement fees are incurred? Can parents limit the materials to which their child has access, whether this involves books parents disapprove of or R-rated DVDs? Is it a violation of professional ethics to allow parents, as at least a few libraries quietly do, to request special library cards that restrict their children to checking out material from the children's collection? Should parents or guardians be involved in reference transactions? Many writers have argued that young people's rights merit absolute defense. There is research that evokes a compelling image of young people as independent, perhaps even abandoned by their traditional caregivers; lacking safe places and well-intentioned advisors; without resources, dependent on our sympathy and our resources.<sup>13</sup> It's more than a truism to say we've come a long way since the first years of the profession in this country; it is indisputably true.

Philosopher and poet George Santayana famously observed in his *Life of Reason*, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." In librarianship, we credit ourselves with remembering information history—times when people were denied access to materials thought to be sensitive or controversial and times when people were prohibited from using libraries because of their age, their national origin, their politics, or the color of their skin. In an effort not to repeat those dark times, we have articulated goals of providing services to all, including young people.

Yet this enthusiasm can overshadow other elements of the profession's past—chiefly, awareness of the relevant expertise of other fields. Some have argued that, when psychologist G. Stanley Hall published his two-volume work *Adolescence* in 1909, he invented both adolescence and adolescent psychology.<sup>14</sup> Librarians were among those who considered his advice as they grappled with efforts to serve and guide the young people who entered their facilities. As the twentieth century wore on, efforts to understand teens persisted. A writer for *Publishers Weekly* in 1929 observed, "Of recent years the adolescent girl has been much in the public eye. Her psychology,

her behavior problems, her needs, all have been discussed at great length.”<sup>15</sup> Librarians followed these discussions. The American discovery of adolescence and the reform impulses of the Progressive Era informed librarians’ interests in young people.

Many ideas about youth services put forth by Progressive Era librarians, among whom Bean and Cole could be numbered, would strike few of us as truly progressive. Yet as the Progressive Era unfolded, these librarians did something right in seeking out the ideas and advice of those whose research in the social and behavioral sciences would contribute to their ability to work effectively with young people. They believed their own professional training could and should be supplemented by other kinds of information about teens. They found that their work with adolescents would be improved by seeking out ideas beyond the boundaries of their own field. Educators and psychologists were among the experts these professionals consulted, and librarians monitored prominent general-readership magazines that published commentaries about young people and books.

It has been argued that providing library services in a dynamic contemporary environment is most appropriately guided by the profession’s core values and enduring principles. I argue that professional service to young adults requires librarians to have an informed understanding of adolescence as well as strong beliefs in service and access. More than personal memories, however deeply felt, of that sometimes strange and awkward time, librarians’ sense of what it means to be an adolescent should derive from contemporary research that offers changing and even challenging perspectives about our young clientele. More than knowledge of current young adult titles, the latest teen enthusiasms, or even the LIS research literature should inform a young adult librarian’s professional practice. The work of other disciplines can help us as we think about the issues involved in balancing our efforts to connect with teens and to support their transition into adult life; it can also help us as we communicate with other professionals invested in teens’ success, safety, and happiness.

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## **Who Is a Young Adult?**

At an ALA Conference panel for young adult librarians, one practitioner asked, “Who is the young adult?” The problem, she observed, was that different people seemed to describe entirely different age groups when using the phrase librarians have adopted for patrons between the ages of twelve and eighteen. How were young adult librarians to know when someone talking about young adults was actually talking about young adults? This librarian was correct in noticing that the people who are called young adults don’t always belong to the group she intends to serve; further, the clientele of young adult departments may be given different names as well.

Those outside LIS who work with young people have different vocabularies that reflect the history and norms of their respective fields. Many other disciplines, including public health and psychology, refer to the group we call young adults as *adolescents*. Adolescence has been divided into three phases—early, middle, and late—to acknowledge the developmental and cultural differences between the experiences of a thirteen-year-old and an eighteen-year-old.<sup>16</sup> Still, there may be instances when other fields use our preferred term or the cohort that an author describes includes teens as well as slightly older individuals. The surest assumption when someone outside the profession uses *young adults* to describe a group is that this person refers to individuals who are no longer of middle school or high school age. To these and other researchers, young adults are eighteen and older—in other words, those who have recently gained legal status as adults in the United States. The combined newness of their status as adults and their age relative to others in the cohort makes them young adults.

Librarians’ choice of the term *young adults* came about in 1957 after years of using a variety of terms to talk about teens. The early journal literature of the field discusses services for “intermediates” and “older boys and girls.” Despite the contention that the term *teenager* came about as the result of marketing and advertising campaigns following World War II, variations on that phrase were in use as these early professionals sought to work with teens.<sup>17</sup> One

occurrence was a 1919 sex education pamphlet that spoke directly to its audience of *teens*.<sup>18</sup> Margaret Edwards, a key figure in the development of modern young adult services, disliked the word. One can hear both the lingering newness of the expression and Edwards's disdain for it. Like Dennett, she used scare quotes around the term when she wrote, "'Teen-agers,' besides being a bit undignified, may sound patronizing or scornful and does not seem to include the more mature sixteen- to nineteen-year-olds." She seemed resigned to the inadequacy of the profession's label for her young clientele: "Who are young adults? They are people in their teens for whom there is no adequate nomenclature."<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the label has endured, and in recent years its meaning seems to be on the verge of changing, as *tweens*, or preteens, have become a market for young adult books. Some librarians have offered tween programs for children as young as eight, despite its original reference to the ages of ten to twelve, the numeric cusp of the teen years.

*Tweens*, despite its rhyming resonance with the word *teens*, is not necessarily in widespread use. When I've used the expression in a class for undergraduates, their puzzlement and disbelief was evident; it's not a label that young people have claimed as their own. I was struck by the awkwardness of a teacher's flailing attempts to find a collective noun for her sixth-grade students in Richard Peck's *The Best Man*. Peck captures adolescents' not unkind disdain as adolescent narrator Archer Magill notes his teacher's "rookie mistakes" in this regard. When new student teacher and reservist Mr. McLeod greets the class, "Good afternoon, troops," Archer is ecstatic. "Troops!" he exclaims to himself. "That's all we called ourselves from then on. It was way better than boys and people."<sup>20</sup> ■

## PROFESSIONS INVESTED IN ADOLESCENCE

### Information Sources and Potential Partners

Who else is interested in teens and their developmental outcomes? What information do they have that can help us help teens? Educators have long been seen as librarians' partners, given our shared investment in young people's literacy. Researchers in several other disciplines want

to know more about young adults as media consumers, computer users, health-care recipients, and simply as growing and changing individuals. These fields are identified and described briefly to provide an overview of prevailing research methods, and information sources are included that may be useful to librarians. Practitioners in these fields may be potential partners for librarians who are involved in outreach and other programming for young adults.

Communication researchers are strongly interested in teens' involvement with mass media. Their definition of *mass media* encompasses television and radio, magazines and newspapers, the World Wide Web and blogs, video games, movies, and music. These researchers use diverse methods to see what programs and pages attract teen attention, what teens make of the media, and what effects media consumption has on teens. The processes by which media create their effects are also of interest. Consequently, communication researchers examine trends in teens' media use and what they make of the information available through all sorts of communication channels.

Some communication researchers focus on interpersonal communication—the interactions that occur between two people or small clusters of individuals. These researchers attend to patterns of expression and barriers to effective communication, including intergenerational conversation and related issues.

Health researchers may be in schools of medicine or public health, in departments of nursing or specialty fields. There are also federal, state, and municipal health departments that collect data and carry out programs to assess and protect the public's well-being. Collectively, these researchers and practitioners produce a simply astounding body of literature each year. Among the massive number of publications are articles concerned with teens' healthy development. Some of these materials address basic health-care matters such as access to doctors and clinics, while others focus on reproductive health and risk-taking behaviors that may distinguish teens from children. Based on behavioral assessments, surveys, and other research, these studies identify the kinds of health information that young people need and also consider teens' information-gathering practices. The result is a rich body of literature that can enhance librarians' efforts to offer teens meaningful and accurate nonfiction materials.

Ever since G. Stanley Hall argued that adolescents were a distinctive population subject to emotional and intellectual turbulence while maturation processes played out, psychologists have been interested in teenagers. In the twenty-first century, researchers in adolescent psychology have considerably more tools at their disposal than the field's pioneers did at the start of the twentieth century. Neuropsychology, a specialized research area, examines "the relation between brain and human cognitive, emotional, and behavioral function."<sup>21</sup> Some neuropsychologists use magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and other new technology to capture brain images that provide insights into activity and change at different ages. Other studies also contribute to a changing understanding of adolescence. Because much of this research is still new, researchers sometimes report observations that contradict previous thinking but are not yet able to provide specific recommendations that might guide our interactions with teens. Nonetheless, recent and ongoing work in psychology replaces the theories of Piaget and other developmental psychologists whose models once explained youth development, relegating them to figures in the history of youth development, rather than current theorists.

Education research, like the research undertaken in psychology, employs a range of methods and comprises numerous special areas. Some work includes scrutiny of newer genres, like graphic novels, as means of encouraging reluctant readers. Other researchers are considering how the dynamics of video games translate into learning. Their findings regarding literacy and learning are of potential use for librarians.

These are some of the fields from which LIS practitioners can draw in their efforts to provide meaningful and appropriate services to young adults. Studies conducted in these areas alternately build on and revise what we know about young people. Given the nature of the revisions that are suggested by this research, though, understanding what is taking place outside the profession is increasingly important as we collaborate with others invested in ensuring the well-being and healthy development of the teens who visit our libraries.

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## **Reading the Research Guidance and Questions**

Ideas about adolescent development are presented in numerous outlets, including interdisciplinary research literature. One way of thinking about research is to see it as an extended, asynchronous conversation with a dispersed set of peers and colleagues. Even if you are the lone teen services librarian in your community, there are others with your passions and problems. When they put forward their ideas, whether in print or podcasts, you have the opportunity to join a dialogue about your shared expertise. The possibilities of e-mail and Twitter make it possible to reach out to these writers, to share your responses. What follows are my suggestions about how you might approach the ranging sources of perspective on adolescence, literature, and librarianship that are available to us today.

Research literature, whether developed by faculty or practitioners, serves many ends in libraries. It allows us to learn about innovation taking place elsewhere, thus aiding the implementation of our initiatives. It alerts us to new uses of technology, shifting trends, and revisions of historically accepted facts that might ask us to modify our services. That said, just as other fields have their own ways of talking about teens, they will have different means of conducting research. There are multiple, valid approaches to research problems, so interdisciplinary scholarly work reflects a range of evidentiary bases and conclusions. As librarians consider the claims about teens put forward in venues from the evening news to scholarly journals, understanding categories of scholarly work and professional writing facilitates our evaluation of the proliferation of publications about young people.

Further, an increasing demand that libraries and other professional, nonprofit entities demonstrate *outcomes*, or the effects of their services, means young adult librarians need to participate in larger discussions about how we know libraries matter. Reading research literature can help us make the case for services and resources when it articulates successes in similar situations. Research can model



strategies for reporting outcomes, conserving the time we have for outreach and other important, community-based activities.

Even more theoretical work has value. One of my professors used to recite this explanatory mantra to us, and now I say this to my students: “The role of theory is to predict, to describe, or to explain.” What changes in services or resources would you anticipate as the result of reading about teens today? What descriptions of adolescence and others’ support for teens’ futures spur new thinking in your community? How might you explain changes, like decreased program attendance or increased circulation? Used strategically, familiarity with research is more than another demand on a librarian’s time; it helps us think through the myriad decisions inherent in professional life.

Reflecting on the diverse sources of information and ideas that contextualize and educate librarians should be a regular part of professional life. This overview of research characteristics incorporates questions that can guide evaluation of the literature, whether produced in LIS or a field whose terminology, at first glance, is baffling.

A *literature review* is a key part of most scholarly work. Often, a literature review introduces and grounds a study or an experiment; sometimes, however, a literature review may be an independent undertaking with the sole purpose of analyzing or synthesizing extant research. In the latter case, the researcher may be interested in the ways different disciplines regard a common interest, in evidence of disparate understandings despite presumed common ground, or in the way a field’s understanding has changed over time. (In essence, this book is a literature review that brings multiple aspects of contemporary research on adolescents into conversation for the benefit of librarians.) In either case, a literature review highlights what is known and draws attention to limitations or gaps that warrant further attention.

- If you are reading a literature review, consider

What dates and disciplines does the study cover? Is its emphasis on recency and disciplinarity, or does it aim to be comprehensive?

What questions does it raise? Does the author suggest a path for responding to those questions?

Does it describe, telling you what others have said, or is it analytical, drawing conclusions and offering insights as a result of its compilations?

The distinction between *basic* and *applied research* reflects the nature of the argument put forward in a research project: is its aim to establish knowledge, or is the aim to solve a particular problem in the field? *Basic research*, the agenda of many studies that document the nature of cognitive change and growth in the brain during adolescence, is focused on establishing what can be known. Technologies that create new research techniques are among the factors that encourage researchers to revisit fundamental assumptions. It may be a precursor to research that solves problems, but a major role of basic research is to advance theory and support further study. A related, newer concept is *translational research*, which looks for ways to bring more conceptual research to bear on practice. Although it has been argued that the difference between basic and *applied research* is a continuum, rather than a polarity, applied research usually addresses questions related to practice and real-world scenarios.<sup>22</sup>

- If you are reading basic research, can you discern the theory or theories under consideration?  
     the problem or issue in knowledge that is being reviewed?  
     whether knowledge is confirmed or modified as a result of the study? (Are the results the basis for a new hypothesis, preliminary, or more definitive?)
- If you are reading a more applied form of research, does the study  
     indicate what problem or problems are being addressed and why?  
     offer solutions or directions for change? (Are these possibilities institutional or more broadly applicable?)

Another common, if not always neat, distinction is between *quantitative* and *qualitative research*. Much work in the humanities is qualitative, drawing on language and images in archival documents, films, and narratives for evidence to support a central argument. A quantitative study derives its power from numbers, which may range from simple descriptive statistics that create a portrait of a population or a place, to more complex calculations that require specialized computer programs and expert training to create inferences and claim causal relationships.

- When you consult a quantitative study, consider

What population is being studied? How was it created?

Researchers differentiate between a random sample, where all members of a defined group have an equal chance of being selected, and more purposive or convenience samples, where the population is selected for a particular reason or is simply a matter of who is willing to participate in the project. A study with a random sample or one whose sampling results in a population like your community is more likely to produce results that can effectively guide your work. A location-specific focus group, for example, does not inherently possess attributes that will hold true elsewhere.

How was the study conducted? For decades researchers have noted problems with phone surveys since not everyone owns a phone. While few studies are impervious to critique, consider whether there are blind spots in the construction that might affect results unduly.

Does the researcher provide the questions that participants were asked, allowing insight into her process?

- When you assess qualitative research, consider

What is the aim and central argument? Because qualitative research does not always reflect a defined, preexisting

method of analysis, a researcher should be clear about purpose.

What is offered as proof? Textual studies, biography, and several other approaches tend to quote heavily from their sources to represent their subjects. Historical work relies on footnotes that reflect the researcher's path through the primary sources found in archives. In most cases, a reader should be able to understand the material that forms the basis for the ideas under consideration.

Whose story is told through this project? Why?

What does the author want you to understand? Is this a new dimension of professional or institutional history? Is it an argument for the value of including particular types of material in a collection? Does it ask you to perceive a community in new ways?

Scholars also may see their work as either *empirical* or *critical research*. Empirical research has a long tradition of generating observation-based conclusions. Originally associated with the scientific method, its allegiance to arguments driven by data, whether quantitative or archival, makes it a touchstone for some researchers in the humanities as well. *Critical studies*, broadly speaking, are invested in using scholarly tools to scrutinize cultural norms that countenance bias or inequality. Numerous subdisciplines adopt this approach to scholarship. Work in this vein has a theoretical allegiance and an objective of social transformation.<sup>23</sup>

- When considering the philosophical orientation of a research project, be attuned to these sorts of issues:

Does the author acknowledge the perspective from which he writes, either directly or indirectly? If he aligns with a theorist or a critical school, do you understand the basic tenets? What assumptions characterize the supporting work?

What is the author's agenda?

What are you asked to know or do as the result of the ideas in this scholarly essay?

*Best practices* research attempts to learn from others in order to choose the most effective, appropriate course for one's own library. Best practices articles may be seen as an evolution of what were once labeled "how we done it good" articles, often belittled as lacking context or self-critique.<sup>24</sup> The intent of best practices literature is to identify the factors most likely to result in desirable outcomes. *Case studies*, which examine the strengths and weaknesses of a particular library endeavor to arrive at recommendations for those involved in similar projects, are a related kind of research. Where best practices articles emphasize a comparative approach to the issue under consideration, typically generated from the library literature, case studies rely more on what is known as *thick description*, an approach associated with Clifford Geertz, coined to describe the detailed work of conveying a situation or phenomenon to those at a remove from it.<sup>25</sup> Thick description, despite its name, supports analytical claims; analysis and evaluation are also integral to best practices articles.

- When considering the utility of articles or books in this category, you might be attuned to the following details:

Is the work of a single library or multiple organizations evaluated? Is the guidance offered reflective of those circumstances?

Is the report a positive overview, or does it acknowledge and suggest how to prepare for difficulties?

What details are provided? Can you tell how many branches and staff were involved in a program? Is the number of hours or the overall time frame for preparations identified? Was financial support provided, and if so, where did it come from?

What represents a positive outcome? Why?

There is a specialized type of scholarly writing referred to as a *think piece*. The think piece may be regarded as the product of

expertise and experience, the informed expression of ideas, less the scholarly apparatus of investigation. The author of a think piece may want to raise questions about common assumptions in the field or how we should respond to current events. This kind of essay may precede further, more conventionally constructed research on the subject.

- If you are reading a think piece, you might want to know
  - Is this author breaking new ground or participating in conversation with other individuals?
  - Is a new concern under discussion, or might it be something that has fallen off our collective radar for a while and deserves new attention?
  - Do questions of your own result from reading this author?
  - Does the essay spark new questions for you?

Research does not eliminate risk. We still may see low turnout for events, books that don't circulate, and services that flop. Still, we can justify risk and manage some difficulties by an informed approach to our work. By considering how or why an article or book was constructed, we are better positioned to evaluate its argument and its relevance to our concerns. Since each approach to research has its own norms, we can consider whether the evidence presented is congruent with the conventions of its scholarly mode, as well as whether the conclusions presented serve our aims of understanding and serving teens. ■

## **UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENCE, HERE AND NOW**

There is increasing attention to youth development, and there are many efforts to follow the emerging understandings of young people, not just in academia but in the popular press as well. Magazine covers and news stories call attention to the ways that young people in the twenty-first century differ from previous generations, if not because

of what these teens and tweens know and do, then because of what is known about them. There are discussions of how the brain grows and changes, whether girls' and boys' brains harbor sex-linked differences, teens' sleep patterns and alertness, and the social environments in which adolescents operate, including social-networking apps like Facebook, Snapchat, and Tumblr. It has become almost routine to hear that one app is popular with teens, only to learn that it has been abandoned in favor of some newer tool once the popularity of an app extends to older users; at the same time, it is also possible to find indicators of continued use of a supposedly dead platform. See, for example, the contention that Facebook is passé, an outlet for parents and even grandparents, versus a media commentary that documented a younger generation's disenchantment with voice mail by sharing one purportedly representative young man's comment: "I guess I usually just assume that it's probably not that important if you didn't text me, and you didn't send me a message on Facebook."<sup>26</sup> It seems to be acknowledged everywhere that young people form a distinct culture whether because of what happens in their heads or what they do with new media.

Librarians must attend to these conversations. The diversity of places where information about adolescence and adolescents can be found—it is no longer the province of scholarly journals that demand a technical vocabulary—has increased the accessibility of evolving ideas about adolescence. This aids our ability to develop services and programs that are in tune with teens' sense of their own needs and with experts on young people in other fields. The conclusions that can be drawn from skilled research and interpretation will change as time passes and more is learned, but the community of youth services practitioners should recognize the importance of such projects. Understanding does not mean simple acceptance; we must evaluate the conclusions that scientists and other scholars are forming so that we can determine how and when to apply their knowledge to our own work with young people. In the end, doing so may mean raising our own questions about young adults in addition to considering others' answers.

This book examines the perspectives of cognate fields that seek to understand the conditions of U.S. adolescents and can speak to our work with young adults in libraries. It invokes empirical research to explore common themes of young adulthood, like maturation, sexuality, and identity. It calls attention to research that invites us to ask questions about our assumptions about teens and our professional practices. It points toward change, but its scope does not include all elements of that change. Instead, it outlines key areas of interest, gives attention to leading scholars and their work, and recommends resources that librarians might enjoy and find informative. In all this, this book suggests ways of thinking about young adults and communicating with others who, like us, aspire to help teens as they seek meaning and fulfillment for their present and future selves.

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