

Book Reviews

Library and Information Science Research: Perspectives and Strategies for Improvement. Ed. by Charles R. McClure and Peter Herson. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1991. 400p. \$69.50 (ISBN 0-89391-731-1); paper, \$32.50 (ISBN 0-89391-732-X). LC 90-25018.

"[The] more we clarify the vital role of research in our profession," John Wilkinson wrote not long ago, "the more puzzling does our fundamental research stance become." The purpose of *Library and Information Science Research* (all royalties from which are to be used for the support of the ALA Library Research Round Table's Jesse H. Shera Award for Research) is to provide some insight into the puzzling purposes and current condition of library and information science (LIS) research and to make some suggestions for its improvement. The book is a compilation of twenty-eight chapters, each written by a different author. While some chapters are the work of authors whom the book frequently refers to as "practitioners"—that is, librarians who work in libraries—most of the chapters were written by library school faculty. The book is divided into three parts: "Overview of Research in LIS"; "Practical Context of Research in LIS"; and "Issues and Concerns Related to Research in LIS." (The rationale for the third section remains somewhat obscure since all of the chapters in that section are, in fact, either attempts to provide overviews of current research, or discussions of the practical contexts for that research; any of these would have fit quite neatly, therefore, into the first two sections.)

The first chapter, by Peter Herson, defines some of the key terms and raises several issues that are treated in other chapters throughout the book. Herson divides LIS research into *basic research*,

"the discovery of knowledge and theory building"; *applied research*, which "includes the testing, confirmation, revision, and refutation of knowledge"; and *action research*, "the investigation of a problem as an aid for local decision making." Much of the research undertaken by library practitioners apparently falls into Herson's category of action research. The book's final chapter contains a well-reasoned summary by Beverly Lynch of some of the main ideas raised throughout the book.

Between Herson and Lynch, we are presented with a variety of viewpoints on factors affecting LIS research, including national agendas and international aspects, ideology, LIS education, the role of different agencies and interest groups, and the function of research in different types of libraries. It should be noted that the purpose of these chapters is not to summarize the LIS research that has been done, but rather to comment on its utility, rigor, and effect, and to recommend improvements and a new agenda. As we would expect from a book consisting of the work of so many authors, the quality and perspective of the chapters vary noticeably, and there is inevitably a certain amount of repetition and contradiction.

One issue of special interest to academic librarians will be the concerns expressed in several of the chapters about the relationships between the kind of research undertaken primarily by library school faculty and that conducted—and used—mainly by practitioners. Charles McClure provides some excellent insights into this problem in his chapter on "Communicating Applied Library/Information Science Research to Decision Makers." Certainly, there are some researchers, especially among library school educators, who attribute what they see as the poor quality of LIS re-

search at least in part to the fact that many of the publications in the field are produced by practitioners engaged in "action research." This concern is especially well articulated by Nancy Van House, who notes that "LIS appears to have an unusual (among professions) preponderance of practitioners publishing in the research literature. The plurality of authors are academic librarians, mostly without doctorates, who generally rely on descriptive statistics." A related problem, Van House explains, is that the "editorial boards of most LIS journals are composed largely of practitioners. Most have national reputations as librarians, but have little or no research training or experience. They may be well-qualified to judge the importance to the practice of the subjects of research, but not the quality of the research methods."

Certainly, on the opposite side of this issue, there are many practitioners who have long since concluded that much of the work of many LIS researchers, especially in the area of information science, is superficial and self-serving, intended not so much to enhance our knowledge about libraries and information as to ape the methods and values of the much more prestigious social and natural sciences. Although Van House alludes to this opposite perspective in her chapter, it is unfortunate that the book's editors did not solicit the contribution of one of the more vocal proponents of this position—someone like Michael Gorman, for example.

The book is, nevertheless, well worth the attention of academic librarians because it contains much useful information, as well as some cogent, original insights. In the second section, there is a wealth of current information on professional associations, LIS journal publishing, consulting, private funding agencies, networks and consortia, and the information industry—all written by articulate authors currently working in those areas. The redefined LIS research agenda presented by Peter Young is especially worth considering. There are also some novel positions put forth that will, one hopes, stimulate further discussion. The

chapter by Mary Biggs, for example, on the rather overworked and potentially trivial subject, "The Role of Research in the Development of a Profession or a Discipline," turns out to be one of the most stimulating and refreshing chapters in the book. Her position is that librarianship is neither a discipline nor a profession. "Librarians probably resemble editors or journalists more closely than doctors or lawyers. Like these 'idea people' in publishing, librarians need a good liberal arts education, an interest in ideas, and the ability to communicate." There is no unique body of knowledge in LIS, Biggs explains, and what content there is in the field has been imported from a variety of disciplines and then applied, sometimes somewhat maladroitly, to the study of information and the operation of libraries. We need to concentrate, therefore, on increasing our knowledge of those source disciplines and to undertake such research as can be applied to practice.

Another especially invigorating chapter is the one on "Becoming Critical: For a Theory of Purpose and Necessity in American Librarianship," by Michael H. Harris and Masaru Itoga. Although the main points in the chapter have already been more effectively presented by Harris in his other publications, his views are sufficiently original and substantive to be worth repeating. Harris may be the only current American LIS researcher who has made a serious effort to apply to the study of library services some of the especially fertile concepts of Marxist theory. His position that the library has been built (consciously or unconsciously) to confirm and maintain the ideology of the dominant class is worth pondering and testing—and could spawn research that would not only be of some theoretical interest, but that could lead to some highly practical applications.

The chapter specifically on "Opportunities and Challenges for LIS Research in Academic Libraries" is, regrettably, among the weakest and most superficial in the book. It consists, for the most part, of clichés and platitudes, concluding with advice for developing a research

strategy that reads as if it were originally written for a class of eighth-graders ("First, find a topic you find interesting and would like to learn more about. . ."). The content and quality of the chapter are reflected quite nicely in its final sentence: "By undertaking LIS research, librarians can assure for the future of being a vital and socially responsible profession [sic]."

Fortunately, the book also contains an excellent chapter by Joe Hewitt on "The Role of the Library Administrator in Improving LIS Research" that is particularly applicable to academic libraries and that most academic librarians will probably find to be the most informative and useful chapter in the volume. Hewitt acknowledges how difficult it is for the current practitioner to undertake research and how little help research now provides for library decision making. He, nevertheless, makes a number of credible and practicable suggestions for integrating research into the real world of librarianship.

The book appears to have been hastily edited and contains, as can be seen from the above quoted final sentence from the chapter on academic libraries, an unusually large number of typographical oversights. In the "Contributors" section at the end of the book, to cite another especially unfortunate example, the first lines of two of the paragraphs containing biographical information have been deleted, so that the names of the authors to whom the biographical information refers are missing. At \$69.50 for 400 pages, one expects a more professional job.

The book clearly does achieve its objective of providing, from a wide variety of perspectives, some useful insights into the presumed purposes and present state of LIS research. While many of the chapters skillfully describe some of the fundamental weaknesses of LIS research, a few—perhaps rather more eloquently—actually show us those weaknesses through the self-important triviality of their own content. In either case, academic librarians concerned about the health and future of LIS research will find much in this book to think about.—*Ross Atkinson, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.*

Peters, Thomas A. *The Online Catalog: A Critical Examination of Public Use.* Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1991. 266p. alk. paper, \$36.50 (ISBN 0-89950-600-3). LC 90-53602.

Thomas Peters's stated goal is to "focus on actual user behavior and [on] the theoretical implications of online catalogs, especially regarding the use of remote access." The goal is an ambitious one. Peters undertakes a review of the literature in the first eight chapters of the book, citing much of what has been published on online catalogs. Topics include the history of online catalogs, their purposes and traits, the flow of information from producers through middlemen to consumers, the philosophy of OPACs, and the problems with these catalogs, and possible solutions. In other sections, Peters reviews methodologies for evaluating online catalogs and their use. Emphasis is given to transaction log studies, the approach Peters used in conducting his analysis of remote access use. Several chapters are then devoted to reporting the results of the study Peters undertook of dial-up use of the online catalog at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. The final chapters relate online catalogs to the academic and information environments in which they exist.

Although the bibliography and bibliographic references are useful, the individual arguments frequently interesting, and the study of dial-up access a contribution to what is known about online catalog use, the purpose of the book as a whole remains unclear. The literature review, in particular, poses serious problems. The style in which it is presented makes it difficult to sort out the arguments used in the works being cited from Peters's own arguments. Paraphrasing—where, in many cases, more obvious direct citation might have been better—makes it difficult to determine where one author's ideas begin and end. In a number of cases, difficult conceptual issues are presented with too little explanation, particularly in Peters's references to the nonlibrary literature relating to philosophy and technology. In some of