

A Meeting of the Minds:
Enhancing Libraries' Contribution to Communities of Relationships

by

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This thesis is dedicated to my grandma, Ellen Brauner, who earned not just one, but two
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Abstract

Previous research on public libraries identifies three kinds of communities that libraries create and nurture: communities of place, communities of interest, and communities of relationships. Based on 36 semi-structured interviews with library staff and users at twelve public libraries in the American Midwest, chosen to cut across urban, suburban, and rural areas, I find that current library practice prioritizes communities of place and communities of interest and excels at building them. Communities of relationships among users, however, do not seem as deliberately cultivated, even though there is evidence of libraries as enablers of relationships particularly in the context of children's programming.

This paper presents my findings with respect to public libraries and their community-focused impact. In addition, I consider possible reasons for the current emphasis on communities of place and interest. I propose that greater emphasis on communities of relationships could be invigorating for both public libraries and their users, by drawing in demographic groups less likely to use the library, increasing connection among community members, and promoting civic discourse. Finally, I make recommendations for how public libraries can enhance their contribution to relationship among library patrons.

Introduction

Community figures prominently in public libraries' self-conceptions across the English-speaking world. A review of 30 library mission statements collected by the Urban Libraries Council (n.d.) finds that 70% of libraries cite community-related goals. Eleven (37%) of the mission statements explicitly contain the word "community," and another ten (33%) mention closely related phrases such as "connect," "neighborhood," and "engaged citizenry." Among these mission statements, the word "community" is second only to "information" in its frequency of occurrence. This echoes findings by a study by Barniskis (2016), who found that in the mission statements of 32 public libraries in Wisconsin, community-wide benefits were mentioned more frequently than individual benefits.

Yet, what exactly is community, and how do public libraries foster it? The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2009) lists as many as thirteen definitions of community, many with sub-definitions, but two of them capture the essence of the rest: One kind of community is characterized by "The fact of having a quality or qualities in common"; the other by "The fact of being in communion; social intercourse; fellowship, amity." In other words, a community is either a group of people who share something in common (whether or not they know each other), or it is a group of people with social ties to one another (whether or not they are similar in other ways).

Meanwhile, library scholars have rallied around three dominant concepts of community, as stressed by Morse (2014) in a book about civic communities. Morse writes that "people connect themselves in multiple ways, but around these three nexuses: relationships, interests, and place." Of these, two – interests and place – fit within the dictionary definition of having something in common. A community of interest is formed when people who share a common

interest come together. Libraries, of course, are known for programs that bring together people who enjoy detective stories or 3D printing or knitting and so forth. A community of place is created by people living in the same geographic area, and such communities are a natural constituency for brick-and-mortar libraries whose users tend to be the people who live in the local area. The third type of library community – the community of relationships – coincides with the dictionary definition based on social ties. Libraries create such user-to-user connections through recurring programs, such as children’s storytime, that bring together the same set of participants and their families on a regular basis. These three definitions of community are well-suited for the activities of most public libraries: Scott (2011a) uses the framework to investigate the impact of public libraries in the Seattle area. Fisher et al. (2007) applies a very similar classification to understand libraries as physical, social, and informational places. Willingham (2008) applies these community types to discuss the civic role of public libraries.

In this paper, I present findings and analysis from a qualitative exploration of twelve public libraries in the American Midwest, chosen to span urban, suburban, and rural geographies. My original research question was not specific to communities and simply asked, *What is the nature of public library impact beyond lending materials, and how can the different impacts be conceptualized?* My research was based on the recognition that public libraries throughout the United States engage in innovative programming that goes far beyond lending materials: from “maker” activities to summer learning, from public lectures to anti-violence training (American Library Association, 2016). Less than a third of adult library users, however, report attending a library program (Horrigan, 2016). In the words of one branch manager in the study, “it’s still a struggle to get the word out,” despite attempts to publicize new services through print sources,

in-person outreach, and digital social media.

As I constructed a framework for discussing the different kinds of library impact, however, a new question arose: *In what ways do public libraries contribute to community?* Later, I narrowed my focus even further to: *In what ways do public libraries contribute to community-building between library patrons?* Ultimately, my focus shifted to this latter question about community, which I believe to be the most relevant and revealing for public libraries. After presenting my findings along these lines, I highlight what I perceive to be an opportunity for public libraries. Building on existing strengths in fostering communities of place and of interest, public libraries could make deliberate shifts to encourage communities of peer relationships between patrons. Doing so has the potential further advance the library's role as a vibrant community center.

Methodology

For this study I drew on semi-structured interviews conducted by Simmons SLIS student Ayoola White as well as my participant observation as a library employee. White conducted 36 total interviews with staff, volunteers, and library users at twelve public libraries (ten in southeast Michigan and two in Illinois), a state library, and a library cooperative. These interviews were conducted in 2016. The libraries spanned urban, suburban, and rural areas: Three libraries lay within city limits, six libraries were suburban, and three were not in a metropolitan area. Eight of the libraries served over 50,000 people; one library served between 26,000 and 50,000 people; two served between 12,000 and 25,999 people; and one served fewer than 12,000.

The interviews were based in a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1994), in which high-level generative questions about library impact were asked in a way that was open-ended and allowed participants to respond according to their own definitions of impact. The interview protocol probed for library impact, significant programs, and unique offerings. In this study, the perception of library impact largely comes from the libraries' point of view. Across the fourteen institutions, White interviewed library staff (n=24), volunteers (n=2), and library users (n=10). The interviews with library staff were generally between a half hour and hour in length, while interviews with volunteers and library users were generally around ten minutes.

Ayoola White recorded each interview in a detailed, narrative text, based on audio recordings where interviewees gave permission to record, or in a minority of cases on interviewer memory where recordings were unavailable. (When I refer to these interviews I use direct quotes when available and, if not, summarize using language from White's narratives to best reflect the intent of the interviewees.) To identify themes and library impacts, I performed open coding of the interviews at the paragraph level, and then compared those codes to an initial coding performed by White. I identified about twenty impact codes, applied to a total of 406 distinct portions of the notes. White also identified about twenty codes; I noted substantial conceptual overlap in 31 of the codes, which I merged. In addition, some codes were eliminated: one code ("increased library use") was discarded because it reflected an intermediate outcome rather than an impact. Another ("appreciation for nature") was after closer inspection recoded as education and lifelong learning. In all, I resolved the two sets of codes to a set of 22 common codes. Then, I clustered the 22 impact codes into nine larger domains of impact, as discussed in

the next section. These final nine domains formed the basis of my analysis and resulting framework of library impacts.

Table 1. Impact domains by number of instances and general frequency in interviews.

Domain	Mentions	Frequency
Education & lifelong learning	130	High
Recreation	87	High
Empowerment & advancement	62	Medium
*Space and other communal resources	44	Medium
*Social ties	31	Low
*Economy	31	Low
*Community enrichment	25	Low
*Community membership and civic engagement	21	Low
Informed parenting	4	Very Low
Total	435⁺	

** These domains are noted in Figure 1 to have group- or community-level impact.*

+ Total mentions add up to more than 406 coded instances, because some passages discuss issues relevant to multiple codes.

I also tallied the number of times that conversations around each domain occurred across all interviews. These tallies are noted in Table 1, but I urge caution in interpreting what the numbers mean. The specific numbers say little about public libraries in any statistically representative sense, because neither the participant libraries nor our interviewees were selected to be a representative sample, and the interview protocols were not designed to arrive at quantitative metrics of impact. On the other hand, to the extent that participating libraries were

chosen for their geographic diversity, and because interviews were open-ended with minimal prompting about impact types, I believe that at a coarse level, the relative magnitudes are indicative of the prominence of each impact domain in terms of library goals and programming. For the purposes of analysis and discussion, I have labeled each domain as occurring with high, medium, low, or very low levels of frequency. (As is common for power-law distributions of data, frequency labels were determined by taking the logarithm of number of mentions and separating into quartiles.)

While most of the findings in this paper are based directly on the interviews, the analysis is also informed by my own direct understanding of libraries as a part-time employee at the Ann Arbor District Library (AADL) for nineteen months and previously as a staff member in youth services at a large public library in Oregon. I have also drawn on anecdotes from those experiences, which I identify in the text.

Framework for Analysis

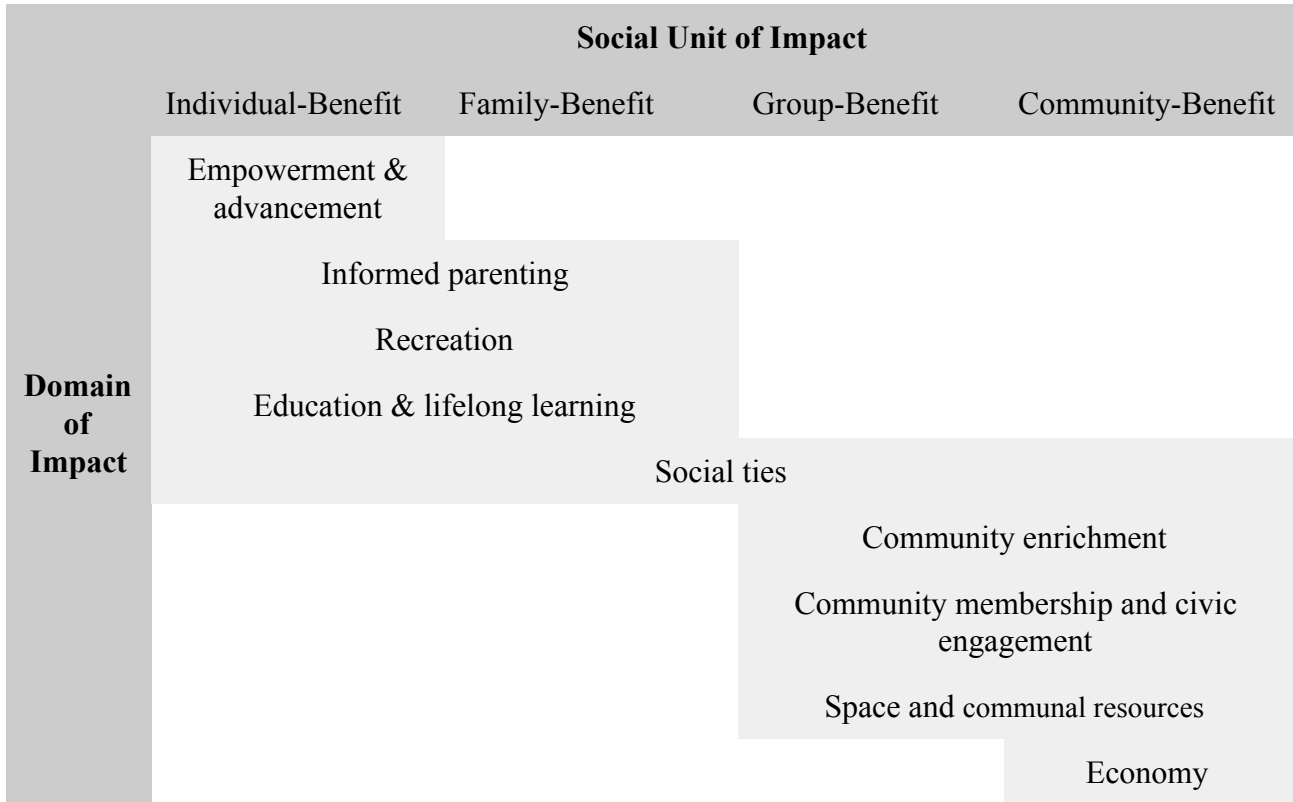
To make sense of these impacts, I grouped the codes along two thematic axes: domain of impact and social unit of impact. The first, domain of impact, has been used as a strategy to categorize library impacts by a number of scholars, based in some cases on literature reviews and interviews (Huysman & Oomes, 2013) and in others on syntheses of library studies (Debono, 2002). Domains can be broad. In a study of Dutch libraries, Huysman and Oomes (2013) identified just four domains: cultural, social, educational, and economic. Debono (2002) took a more granular approach, identifying two projects that together formed the broadest array of impacts. She constructed a list of eleven impacts: Basic literacy; business and career; library as

place; information literacy; local history and genealogy; general information; empowerment; health and well-being; personal development; social cohesion; imagination and creativity.

I sought my own taxonomy of library impacts along these lines, but bottom up as suggested by the data. My analysis identified nine distinct domains of impact: empowerment and advancement, informed parenting, recreation, education and lifelong learning, social ties, community enrichment, community membership and civic engagement, space and communal resources, and economy (See domain impact categories in Figure 1).

The framework also uses a second axis, the social unit of impact, which identifies whether the impact is experienced primarily by individuals, families, groups, or communities. Roswitha Poll (2012) distinguished between impacts that occur to individuals or more broadly socially, and I built on these two categories by splitting social impacts into three levels that were explicitly noted or implied in the interviews: family, (non-family) group, and whole-community impacts. Of course, impacts on individuals may diffuse into broader impacts, and community-level impacts presumably have individual value, as well, so clear lines between these types of impact do not exist. My intention with these distinctions, however, is to focus on immediate effects, and to acknowledge the sense that some impacts affect social structures taken as a whole. For example, quality family time, or increased trust within neighborhoods, are impacts that occur at the family and community levels, respectively; they cannot be readily reduced to impacts on individuals. In Figure 1, I chart the domains and the social unit impacts they most often have, according to the interviews.

Figure 1. Major categories of public library impacts based on interviews with our participant libraries.



Findings

Domain-Wise Impact

The first domain, empowerment and advancement, refers to the ways that individual users achieve their own goals through access to the information services and other library programs. Very tangibly, community members use library resources to prepare resumes, apply for jobs, and interview. The director of a rural library said that the greatest impact of library services occurs when users “completely change their economic status” through access to GED courses and career services. In other cases, library services enable users to access other government and community resources. A manager identified assistance with the Community

Health Automated Medicaid Processing System (CHAMPS) as one of the most impactful services the library provides. CHAMPS provides financial assistance for families who provide healthcare to their family and requires use of an online tracking system. The website is hard to use and first time users spend around three hours creating an account. As a result, users of this service have sought help from libraries and the manager proudly reported "we rose to the occasion." When libraries successfully help people accomplish their goals, they empower them. A library technology supervisor from our study said that the library gives "people the idea that they can make things, that they have more agency over their lives and can get skills that can benefit them intellectually, materially, creatively." These activities have impact at the individual level, with empowerment, agency, and personal growth as objectives.

Informed parenting results from library services when information from library materials and programs affect the way that caregivers rear their children. For example, some public libraries provide kits of materials related to common parenting issues, like toilet-training. Even programs ostensibly meant for children also educate adults about parenting. One coordinator of youth services said that she develops programs to "entice parents" so that the parents "understand the importance of reading and taking children to the library." By attending these programs, parents see staff model child-rearing behaviors and observe other parents interacting with their children. This can result in significant impacts on child development, as one youth services librarian explained: "Story time has the potential to be an early intervention service to parents. With having kids in the same age range, it is really easy to see when kids are not on track in terms of developmental skills. I do know of parents who have taken their children to speech or movement therapy as a result of story time." These impacts have a direct effect on

parents as individuals or couples, but to the extent that they also affect other members of the household, I count their impact as spanning both individuals and families.

A third domain of impact is recreation, which was the category most commonly mentioned in our interviews. Library services provide recreational benefits when they offer opportunity to engage in enjoyable activities or experiences, some of which also include educational dimensions. Recreational activities for families include staged performances such as magic shows and outdoor summer celebrations. For young adults, libraries mentioned gaming, both electronic and analog: Minecraft and Dungeons and Dragons were specifically noted, and because of the timing of our interviews in Summer 2016, many participants mentioned gatherings for the recently released Pokemon Go app. Lastly for adults, libraries offered a combination of presentations and activities. A branch manager views adult programs as providing the users an opportunity to relax. Her suburban library has an adult coloring book program where the staff try to set up a relaxing environment by serving herbal tea and playing zen music. She considers this a remedy for “24/7 technology” and today’s “go, go, go pace.” Two libraries specifically mentioned recreational opportunities for older adults: One rural library offers story hour at assisted living homes while another suburban library puts on both music concerts and storytelling for older adults.

Several points stand out with respect to libraries’ recreational impact. First, services with impact on children, youth, and families as a whole were mentioned most frequently; staff at eight of the twelve libraries in the study mentioned recreational programming for children, teens, and families, and in each of the cases, comments about these programs dominated much of the interviews. In contrast, recreational impact on, say, young adults who are not parents, was very

rarely mentioned. Second, while recreational activities often took place as groups, the nature of their impact was consistently at the individual or family level – participants experienced the activities as individuals or as families, and few group outcomes were mentioned above and beyond what participants experienced on their own. This is notable because in contexts outside of libraries, recreation often involves social engagement as a significant component. Take recreational sports, for example; teams often are based in existing friendships or result in new ones. Third, likely because of libraries’ ingrained identities as sites of information and learning, almost all of what library staff cited as recreational impact also contained educational components. Indeed, the subset of recreational activities related to the “maker movement” were counted both in this category and the following, which brings us to the next domain of impact: education and lifelong learning.

Education and lifelong learning is perhaps one of the most classic roles of libraries: to support the formal and informal educational pursuits of community members. As with recreation, programs for children, youth, and families dominated this category and were highlighted by all twelve participating libraries. Predominant among the interviews were mentions of storytime and summer reading programs and their contributions to literacy. Managers at two suburban libraries mentioned the value of storytime in creating lifelong library users. Libraries also supplement school curricula, for example by designing STEM programs including computer programming and robotics. A youth services manager viewed the most significant potential impact of the programs on children as “That they enjoy on of the activities and develop an interest in that STEAM area (science, tech, math, engineering, art). When we’re dealing with 0-6 year olds, this could lead to an eventual career.” In a few cases, libraries mentioned offering SAT classes and

other programs explicitly aimed at advancing library users' educational options. To a less pronounced extent, libraries also support lifelong learning for adults. Nine libraries mentioned services such as GED tutoring, ESL groups, and donations of library books to other organizations with adult members.

One difference between the recreational and education goals of public libraries is that the latter are sometimes aimed at school groups, either on a classroom basis or affecting a school's entire student body. For example, one large suburban library held a kickoff event for a One Book/One School program. In this community the school chose a certain book for all families to read together; at the kick-off event, the first chapter of the chosen book was read. To the extent that these activities appear to foster groups of students in some way, I count some of this impact as occurring at the group level.

The domain of social ties refers to the ways that engagement with the library strengthens relationships among library users and between library users and staff. A description of the impacts related to this domain appears below in the section, "Different Kinds of Community."

Public libraries also impact groups and communities directly through community enrichment of various kinds. I count in this category the hosting of events, sometimes in partnership with local organizations, and archiving of historical resources. For example, public libraries plan fairs related to particular topics, such as assistive technology or local authors. A librarian in a large, suburban community was pleased with the outcome of a festival they held about weather. She said, "I started working with others to plan this program eight months prior and worked with other city departments, local schools, a few non-profits and a local TV station... This was a huge commitment but we got 1,000 people including 500 school kids to

come to the library. It was a lot of work but with big reward and we are planning to repeat the event next May again.”

Public libraries also enrich their communities by housing historical archives or collections of local publications. Among the libraries in this study, one urban library preserves a local newspaper archive; an administrator at that library says “we would rather have it here than in the dumpster,” recognizing that by maintaining the archive, the library is preserving local history that would otherwise be lost. What these events and historical resources have in common is that they bring out an element of group or community cohesion that transcends impact on individuals. In some of these cases, as with a historical archive, the resources arguably contribute to the larger community even if at any given point in time, no individual or family gains directly from them.

Continuing with the theme of community, another domain of impact is community membership and civic engagement, where the library acts as a symbol of the community and a gateway to entering the community. Citizenship and ESL classes are common library services nationwide that fulfill this role. A survey of 35 member libraries of the Urban Libraries Council found that 40% offered citizenship classes and 62% offered ESL courses (Ashton and Milam, 2008). A librarian in a suburban community addressed the value of the library’s citizenship assistance program. She said that the program, which is coordinated with local law schools, is a vital service to the large immigrant population.

Other library services that promote community membership and civic engagement focus on community identity for all residents. For example, a suburban library sponsored an event called “Get to Know Your Muslim Neighbors.” The four-hour drop-in event allowed attendees to

ask Muslim community members any questions they might have and learn about Muslim history and culture. The library director recalled one older woman who said that she had not realized how similar her own hopes and dreams were to those of Muslim people in the community. Through events like these, the library provides opportunities for people to develop and express their community membership. Similarly to the domain of community enrichment, programs with themes of community membership and civic engagement contribute to community cohesion.

Finally, public libraries have some impact on the larger economy by supporting entrepreneurs. Libraries often provide an array of business services. The libraries participating in this study identified printing services, digital resources, and partnerships with business associations such as SCORE (a nonprofit that provides business consulting), the Chamber of Commerce, and the Small Business Development Center. Nationwide, about a third of libraries offer programs on how to start a business (Rainie, 2016). When business owners access these services, it is clear they are empowered at the individual level. A 2010 study in Philadelphia found that about 8% of community members depended on library resources to start, develop, or expand their businesses (Fels Institute of Government, 2010). Beyond individual empowerment, these services also result in longer-term social impact at the community level. A new business provides employment opportunities and contributes to local prosperity. However, while there seem to be many opportunities for economic impact, I found only two instances of business creation in the interviews. One rural library director said that a community member was interested in setting up an organic farming business but lacked the knowledge of how to do it. She was at the library “constantly for four years,” consulting books about gardening and business. As a result of the skills she learned at the library, she now has a successful

community-supported agriculture service that benefits many members of the community. In another case, in a suburban community, a community member used library business services to start a cookie business that eventually employed five people.

Strong Impact on Individuals and Families

I found that the vast majority of library impacts primarily affect individuals and families through the domains of education and lifelong learning, empowerment and advancement, recreation, social ties, and informed parenting. In the interviews, mentions of activities with individual or family-level impact were coded 314 out of 435 instances, and the proportion likely undersells the depth and breadth of these impacts because the interview protocols intentionally sought out a wide range of impact types, somewhat flattening disparities in the rates of mention.

In addition to this quantitative evidence, libraries' strong orientation to individuals is visible in how they assess their programs. Libraries use attendance and popularity to ensure as many individuals are benefiting from programs as possible. Six libraries, both suburban and rural, discussed the importance of attendance in deciding whether a program was successful or whether it should be repeated. One suburban librarian described a local author fair that was cancelled, "Initially it drew 150 people to the event but as the years went on it got down to drawing only 50 or so people. We tried different things... and these things helped but didn't bring attendance back up." Ultimately, the program was assessed based on the individual attendees rather than the value of the program to local authors as a group.

Somewhat less understood, at least by the general public, is that modern public libraries focus considerable attention on family-level impact, as well. Especially in the domains of

recreation, education and lifelong learning, and informed parenting, libraries demonstrate a strong commitment to families. For instance, the director of a suburban library says the average user of her library is a family unit, which would affect how that library approaches collections, programs, and even its space. Well designed children's areas create opportunities for families to spend time together. The head of youth services at a large, suburban library observed, "Parents are using the library—they don't just come for storytime. They sit and play, which builds their literacy skills. They explore the children's room. They check out books. Tuesday mornings especially are a zoo here from 9-12, when story time only takes up 60 minutes of that time. It is fantastic to watch." So, anecdotally, much of public library impact occurs at the level of families, and indeed, a nationwide survey confirms that parents of minor children are 8% more likely to use their library than non-parents (Horrigan, 2016).

Limited Impact on Groups and Communities

In contrast to individual and family-level impacts, impacts at the group and community levels appear to occur much less frequently. Domains associated with these levels of impact – social ties, community enrichment, community membership and civic engagement, space and communal resources, and economy – came up only 152 times out of 435 in the interviews. Though standard caveats about quantitative comparisons of qualitative data apply, this is about half of the mentions of individual and family impacts (at 314 out of 435), and as noted earlier, the protocols likely underestimate the disparity. The difference is significant and further supported by an analysis of the interview content, which suggests that group- and community-level impacts are less intensive than individual- and family-level impacts along

multiple dimensions.

First, group- and community-level impacts do not appear to receive the same mindshare. For instance, while staff at every library highlighted their contributions to education (a primarily individual benefit), only eight libraries volunteered social ties as a significant library impact. And, they spoke about these contributions in less detail; instances where social ties were built or strengthened were mentioned just 31 times out of 435. Second, libraries encounter challenges sustaining partnerships with groups and outside organizations. One urban library seeks to offer group-level education benefits by offering a music program to elementary classrooms. However, the outreach manager reported that lately it has been harder to find teachers who are willing to participate in this program. Third, even as library projects affect whole groups and communities as sets of people, they tend not to foster new relationships among community members. Of all ten library users interviewed, only two said that they had met people through library programs. There seems to be desire for more interaction, however. One suburban library held conversations with community members to identify their priorities and found that their community wants to know their neighbors better.

Together, these two findings – the individual- and family-centric impact of public libraries, and the muted impact on social ties within groups and communities – are interesting because of the seeming contrast they present with community members' interests and libraries' own emphasis on community in their mission statements.

Discussion and Related Work

Different Kinds of “Community”

What might account for the difference between public libraries’ apparent emphasis on community and the reality of their more individual- and family-oriented impact? One explanation is that there are different senses of the word “community,” and that the one used in library rhetoric differs from the definition of group and community impact I used to code the interviews. Writing about civic engagement, Morse (2014) wrote that “people connect themselves in multiple ways, but around these three nexuses: relationships, interests, and place.” Importantly, these nexuses produce three distinct, if sometimes overlapping, types of community: a community of relationships is about knowing and being known by others, a community of interest rallies people around topics of shared curiosity, and a community of place contains those living in a certain geographic area or accessing a certain space. From the interviews, I find that libraries do in fact have considerable impact building communities of place and communities of interest, but they seem less focused on strengthening communities of relationships – except of a certain kind, which I will turn to in a moment.

Public libraries are first of all defined by communities of place. Also referred to as “spatial communities,” communities of place can refer to either the geographic bounds of the community or the physical resource of the library building itself. As an example of the former, libraries are often funded by a geographical service district. The boundaries of that district determines who can obtain a library card for free. Thus, the impact of services requiring a library card is on a “community,” but a community of place that is clearly defined and funded by location. This fits the definition of community used in most of the mission statements of libraries

in my study as well as in Barniskis (2016). The second kind of spatial community emerged in the interviews as staff discussed the physical library building. Libraries provide meeting space and host events in multi-purpose rooms. One library supervisor explained that her library branch is a significant resource to the community as a whole; at minimum it is “a place for people to spend an hour of their time, just a place to be out of the elements and unharassed.” That is, the library as a building hosts a community of place.

Nurturing communities of interest is another strength of libraries. In their educational and recreational roles, libraries offer events and programs that appeal to a wide variety of specific interests. One recent trend is an embracing of the maker movement – libraries have purchased tools like 3D printers and sewing machines. A library cooperative director describes this as “a playground for invention at all ages,” a description which overlays a community of interest on top of a community of place. Libraries also draw together people through events like summer produce exchanges, health fairs, and nature-related initiatives. One large suburban library has hosted a recurring jazz and blues program for the past twelve years, providing a regular opportunity for fans of the music to gather.

But if library staff, volunteers, and community members made many comments about libraries as communities of place and communities of interest, they said relatively little about the libraries encouraging communities of relationships, specifically as they relate to relationships among library users. This is not to say that communities of relationships are altogether absent at libraries. They certainly form and exist. Human beings are social creatures – it would be surprising if having gathered as a community of place or interest, some people did not engage in spontaneous greetings and conversation. So, as noted earlier, parent-child bonding within

families is intentionally emphasized within children's programs. And, children and parents also appear to build relationships across families as they meet and re-meet at regular events. Staff at three libraries (two suburban and one rural) mentioned playgroups where parents of toddlers can gather for coffee while their children play with developmentally appropriate toys. The director of one small, rural library observed that mothers make connections with one another at storytime and that "it grows a community in a positive way."

Yet, even in these cases, library staff see the social interactions of users as a pleasant side-effect of participating in programs with other goals, whether education, recreation, or otherwise. One occurrence I witnessed illustrates this tendency: At a library celebration for a popular writing challenge, an inquisitive attendee – tellingly, not the library staff who was facilitating the event – appeared frustrated by the lack of participant interaction. She suggested mid-way through the event that everyone introduce themselves and their projects. As a direct result, writers who had previously been aloof began answering each other's questions, lingered to talk, and made new friends. It seems that libraries take a *laissez-faire* approach to relationship building among users. A community outreach librarian in a suburban community says the library purposefully leaves time after a program in case people want to linger and talk, but made no comment about staff purposefully connecting attendees with each other. An exception was a teen discussion group where staff or participants selected a topic to address each week. The youth services librarian at this suburban library explained that the objective for the group was "a greater sense of community, a desire for growing intentional space, instead of letting things happen haphazardly." This program appeared to be deliberately contributing to a community of relationships among teens.

This leads us to the one kind of relationship that libraries do explicitly seek to nurture: the binary relationships between the library (or library staff) and library users. This pattern was clearest in outreach, where library staff initiate relationships that are sustained through library services. A young adult librarian explained that “part of my work is just the conversations with everyday people about what the library can do for everyone.” Within the library walls, staff are also seeking to connect with users. A rural library director noted that staff are able to know users personally and “everyone’s involved with what’s going on here.” Patrons of that library relied more heavily on staff because circulation was not automated. Implied in these anecdotes is that the library values the relationship between representatives of the library and library users. And this effort is noticed by library users. One grandmother noted that her granddaughters always ask to visit the library and can name their favorite librarians.

I mention two caveats about these conclusions. First, my contention is *not* that libraries are in any way failing their communities. Quite the opposite, they are strong presences in their communities and their impact is felt. Rather, these finding suggests that it is possible to serve communities of place and communities of interests without emphasizing communities of relationships, and this data provides some evidence that this is what libraries do in practice.

Related Work in Libraries and Communities of Relationships

The library research literature generally confirms the finding that libraries do not emphasize the formation and maintenance of relationships among users. Two separate studies of the Seattle-area library systems note different ways that communities of relationships take a backseat to communities of place and interest. Fisher et al. (2007) conducted 226 interviews with

a diverse range of Seattle Public Library users and passersby. They found that three quarters of their subjects were at the library alone, and that most library activity involving a social element occurs with family members, co-workers, and others whom users already know. There, too, the interactions are largely initiated by users, who sometimes use the library as a backdrop (e.g., as a place to take out-of-town visitors); they note no instance of the library itself prompting inter-user interaction. Ultimately, they conclude that while libraries hope to facilitate community, they lacked the conversational activity, likelihood of meeting new people, and community of regulars that characterizes a “third place,” as defined and popularized by the sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1999). Scott (2011a) conducted a study of community-building in the King County Library System and found five categories of efforts: education, inclusivity, civic engagement through space and information, bridge to community resources, and economic vitality. Yet, her findings tend to emphasize the strengthening of communities of place and interest, with few concrete examples of building relationships. At one point, she writes that libraries are “less known for their ability to build communities of relationships... but have the potential to do so in powerful ways” (p. 5).

Similarly, interviews in Lithuania found that people generally view their libraries “as still, quiet and silent space with very limited opportunities to engage in conversation either with other users or with librarians” (Glosienė, Padagaitė, & Petuchovaitė, 2006, p. 52). Yet some library users have found opportunities to engage with others. A survey of community members in Oslo, Norway, found that 28% had entered into conversation with a stranger in a public library (Aabø, Audunson, & Vårheim, 2010). And, about 25% of respondents in Seattle reported that they had visited the library with others (Fisher et al., 2007). These results are consistent with my finding

that libraries have not reached their full potential in building communities of user-to-user relationships.

Studies of particular library programs show that libraries can be quite effective at fostering friendships among library users. Matarasso (1998) studied programs at eighteen public libraries in the United Kingdom. He found, "One of the commonest, even inevitable, consequences of people's involvement in library activities is an extension of their social circle. Of the questionnaire respondents 88% reported that they had made new friends through the project, a figure which was consistent between different projects and different communities." (Matarasso, 1998, p. 16). The potential of library programs to cultivate relationships is further supported by research on library-based programs for immigrants, adult literacy programs, and deposit collections (Fisher, Durrance, & Hinton, 2004; Durrance, Fisher, & Hinton, 2003). Among these programs, outcomes included expanded social network, improved relationships, and space for socializing.

Interestingly, Matarasso (1998) found that the unifying factor of programs that created friendships was that they involved volunteers. For example, parents coordinated weekly playgroups at a library that provided a lending toy library. Similarly, Scott (2011b) found that two events led by community members led to social interaction: parents met other parents at a world language storytime led by local residents and a Spanish language early literacy program was structured like a party, with informal social time, to encourage relationship building. Perhaps volunteers, as community members, share the same desire for social interaction as other library users, but also have more ability to shape programs to encourage interaction.

It is not clear from the literature review whether library users want a more social library.

As mentioned, Seattle residents wanted more interaction with librarians (Fisher et al., 2007). In support of such a shift, users and non-users of libraries in Norway said they wanted their libraries to have activities and a coffee-shop vibe. According to the authors, these desires are indicative of “interest in a public library where the public space is also a social space.” (Evjen & Audunson, 2009, p. 170). However, a study of the public libraries in Toronto and Vancouver, Canada, found that survey respondents considered it a low priority for libraries to provide “a place to socialize” (Leckie & Hopkins, 2002). Recently a survey found that 57% of U.S. adults “definitely” want libraries to “have more comfortable spaces for reading, working, and relaxing” (Horrigan, 2016, p. 2). Unfortunately, this study does not clarify whether U.S. adults want to socialize as they relax. It seems likely that certain segments of the population have a greater interest in social activities. Aabø et al. (2010) found that community members with less education, lower income, or who are active in local initiatives were more likely to casually engage with friends, neighbors, and strangers at the library.

Meanwhile, even when relationship-building is not the primary aim of library services, it is seen as critical to increasing involvement in civic issues. Willingham (2008) argues that if libraries can foster a community of relationships, people will have a better understanding of how they can address public problems. Indeed, forums and community conversations on public issues are two ways that libraries have provided avenues for discussion, interaction, and conceivably even communities of relationships (Kranich, 2010). This role is gaining momentum. Since 2012, the Harwood Institute has partnered with the American Library Association to train library staff in how to hold discussions about what community members want for their communities, engage in discussion with community leaders, and lead community change (Casey, 2015). In addition,

the strategies of community engagement, community organizing, and community building have been effective in increasing public participation in decisions about library services (Sung & Hepworth, 2013; Canham-Clyne, 2009). In one case, library staff engaged in extensive outreach so that community members could design a new branch, guide library programs, and participate in their implementation (Canham-Clyne, 2009).

Cultural Factors De-emphasize Relationship Building?

These findings raise the question of whether there are reasons that public libraries do not emphasize communities of relationships among users. To the extent that strengthening community is very much a library mission, why not seek to foster all three types of community – of place, of interest, *and* of relationships, especially those among users? I speculate that the historical and cultural context of libraries explain why there is less focus on communities of relationships.

In fact, the history of public libraries in North America was based in community of relationships. Some of the early European settlers in the American colonies formed “social libraries,” which were often based in existing communities such as clubs or debating groups (Wiegand, 2015). Indeed, Wiegand (2015) asserts that social libraries had to provide “space for social gatherings” to survive (p. 18). Over time, however, a focus on information services has caused libraries to see their adult users in terms of individuals who need specific, individualized attention. After reviewing newspaper articles and editorials on public libraries through U.S. history, Wiegand (2015) concluded “that the changes American public libraries fostered for individuals constitutes their strongest bond with users” (p. 268). Indeed, the branch manager of a

large, suburban library said that the most common impact of the library services is that “people find what they’re looking for,” whether it’s a book, arts and crafts, or an answer to a question. As a result of library services, “They get what they need and feel that they accomplished something.” This is true even as libraries have made a transition to digital resources, for example, with public computers largely being used for individual activities. The manager of a computer center at a large, urban library explained that users come to the center “for a very specific reason to accomplish a specific task.” In turn, library staff provide “a person literally unlimited time” to help accomplish his or her goals.

In this way, an information-service mission emphasizes information delivery from library staff to library user and less so relationship-building among users. To a great extent, information must be digested by individuals, even when presented to a community of people, and in any case, libraries most often serve information needs one-on-one. Library users can seek help from librarians or from library resources without interacting with any other library users. This is in contrast to schools, which offer information to groups of people who spend several months or years learning and growing together. So, arguably, communities of relationships have a harder time naturally forming in among library users than they do in a school environment among classmates.

Also relevant is that public libraries, particularly in the United States, have a culture of promoting privacy. Indeed, public libraries have often been at the vanguard of privacy protections (Johnston, 2000). The American Library Association (ALA), for example, asserts that “Everyone (paid or unpaid) who provides governance, administration or service in libraries has a responsibility to maintain an environment respectful and protective of the privacy of all

users. Users have the responsibility to respect each others' privacy" (American Library Association, 2014). Most public libraries align with the ALA statement and this manifests in two ways. One, libraries protect privacy by maintaining the confidentiality of which resources and materials a user accesses. For example, libraries are careful to avoid collecting personally identifiable information about user activity whenever possible. Two, public libraries avoid unnecessarily disturbing users. Even as one branch manager in the study emphasized the value of her library "not being about shushing," she also pointed out that the library still has designated quiet areas. Indeed, public libraries are "safe havens for private reflection" (Molz & Phyllis, 1999). Thus, there is a strong norm at public libraries on letting users be. Speaking for myself, I would feel uncomfortable if visits to the library were frequently interrupted by strangers however friendly; I value my moments of solitude – and I suspect I am not alone. On the other hand, interviews with library users suggest that some people go to the library with great hopes for human connection. One study participant said that she comes to the library to meet people, connect, and to get to know her neighbors. Library programs are one setting where it would be appropriate for this community member to expect interaction with others. However, the library's culture of privacy applies even to programming; a library director I have spoken with expressed hesitancy at the idea of asking participants to share their names or participate in discussion.

A Possible Future for Public Libraries?

I suggest that public libraries could put a greater focus on community-building, and specifically on building relationships *between or among* members of a library's community. I believe that doing so will not only serve library users and local communities better, but also be

invigorating for libraries themselves. One way to think of this shift is to imagine the library as *a meeting of the minds* – a type of library community center where existing library goals of information access, education, recreation, and culture persist, and are also complemented by a range of activities intended to strengthen interpersonal relationships within the community, not just between the library and its patrons. In this library, outgoing library staff have studied interpersonal communication, plan programs with varying levels of sociability, and market the types of experiences users should expect clearly. To encourage engagement among community members, library users can propose their own event series much like how undergraduate students can start a club. A group of community members who know each other can submit their proposal or a single champion can seek similarly interested people to sign the proposal. All events are open to everyone and so this structure allows library programs to be built on existing community of interests, because anyone whose curiosity is peaked can join, *and* community of relationships, because these regular groups sustain and form relationships. It is important to note that this library community center provides options to the public. Community members can choose their point of entry: they can elect to use the library quietly, to attend a welcoming program related to their interests, or start their own community-led group.

In strong support of a similar argument made by Willingham (2008), the interviews in this study demonstrate that libraries' most engaged users – families and children – return to the library exactly for and because of these relationship-building opportunities. This library community center attempts to expand such opportunities to all patrons. Doing so will draw in more users, fulfill community members' desire for connection, and enhance civil discourse.

These social opportunities will draw in some community members who do not currently

use the library. A Pew Research Center study found that 18 to 24 year olds are less likely to use the library than adults of other ages, but more likely to socialize with friends and family daily (Zickuhr & Rainie, 2014). Programs that are oriented to sustaining existing relationships could attract them; events like trivia nights explicitly encourage friend group to attend together. By reaching just one non-user in this demographic, the library has the potential to reach even more young adults. One of the community members participating in this study said, “My friend was the one who got me to come here.” This word of mouth marketing is important because only 48% of U.S. adults have used the library in the past year and so most adults are unlikely to be aware of new library programs.

The library community center will also address the desire of community members to build relationships with others. As previously mentioned, a suburban library found that their community members want to know those who live near them better. However, across the United States, only about 20% of people say that “they spend time regularly with neighbors” (Cortright, 2015). Library events with a social bent will provide the opportunity to meet, engage, and build friendships with those living in the community.

Finally, in this current politically contentious time, libraries could play a significant role in restoring constructive political interaction. They could leverage their approval and trust rating to do so. A survey of U.S. adults age 16 and up found that 94% believe that “having a public library improves the quality of life in a community” (Zickuhr et al., 2013). Among participants in this present study, staff at one suburban library reported that a community survey found the library is the best loved organization in the city. But, libraries will have to go beyond a dyadic, staff-to-user relationship to draw on this approval and help people interact about civic issues.

Indeed, a community of relationships, particular as built through community conversations and forums, is seen as critical to increasing engagement in civic issues (Willingham, 2008; Kranich, 2010). A library that purposefully focuses on cultivating a relationship-building skill set among its staff will be better positioned to accomplish this goal.

I describe this vision as a library community center because like libraries, community centers are based on local support, offer a range of social programs, and define their service population as community residents (Hasenfeld & Schmid, 1989). Community centers, however, additionally emphasize and prioritize social interaction. An early study of community centers by Hanifan (1920) – who is credited with coining the term “social capital” – viewed relationships as the first and critical objective for success. He argued that community centers must build social capital before other benefits, such as community improvement, can occur. This idea has persisted through “community action” in the 1960s, the “Healthy Communities” projects in the 1980s, and “community building” in the 1990s (Briggs, 2003; Norris, 2003). For example, the Healthy Communities initiatives took a holistic view of community well-being, considering the role of the geographic community and communities of interest as well as how to engage all community members in creating a vision and tangible change (Norris, 2003). Public libraries have already had success in their educational and cultural missions, but taking on user-to-user relationship-building could greatly prepare community members to work together to improve the community’s health.

The library community center, particularly as it focuses on relationships among library users, is a novel vision in a field full of opinions about library futures. Some say that the future of libraries is digital. For example, James Rosenzweig (2012) argued that the library should

position itself as a “base camp” with information on the best techniques and strategies exploring sources not under library control. But while libraries should certainly keep up with advances in information technologies, it is not clear that either direct competition with or a secondary support role to technology are the most viable routes. Libraries could instead focus on what virtual interactions struggle to deliver (Turkle, 2011) – meaningful peer interactions within naturally occurring communities of place or interest. Another view says that the future of libraries is in improved service within their ongoing missions. Stephen Abram (2012) explained that just like physical retailers who thrive despite e-commerce by providing great customer experiences, libraries should focus on “great library experiences” (p. 91). Specifically, he argues that libraries will need to provide such things as more convenient hours, flexible rules, well-made tech, and external focus. These also seem like good traits for a library to have, but they fall short of providing a compelling vision.

For public libraries who find the vision of engaging library users with each other compelling, several recommendations follow, none of which require significant budget or resources beyond what public libraries already have to operate. All of the ensuing recommendations can be implemented one at a time or across the board. Through the implementation of these ideas, libraries can capitalize on a great opportunity to grow and even prioritize relationship formation among users.

First, while a relationship-rich library community center could be the basis for a fresh new mission for some libraries, others may wish to introduce relationship-building activities gradually and carefully. Libraries could pilot trivia nights, offer a soft-roll out of community member driven event series, or explore discussion groups on civic issues. By testing ideas one at

a time, libraries could take the time to assess their community's needs and interests and whether the program would be a good fit. As already noted, some segments of the population may be more interested in socializing at the library than others. Libraries may wish to try relationship-oriented programs with different age groups and communities of interest to find out where a more social experience is most desired.

Second, strategies for relationship-building could be incorporated into existing library programs. Programs could open with a round of self-introductions as recommended by Johnson, Johnson, and Roseth (2010), or incorporate time for group discussion prompted by facilitator questions, as was described by the youth services librarian who led a teen discussion group. Including volunteers as leaders of programs may also increase the likelihood of new friendships, as observed by Matarasso (1998).

Third, successful one-off programs can be adapted to occur on a routine basis. Consistent with the finding that proximity predicts the likelihood of relationship formation (Nahemow & Lawton, 1975; Stewart, 1941), the interviews in this study find that library services that engage the same users repeatedly and regularly appear to build stronger relationships than one-off programs. Whether it is playgroups, knitting or quilting groups, current events clubs, or homebound services, repeated opportunities to interact with the same people facilitate relationships.

Fourth, as prolific sites of experimentation, many libraries already offer programs that model effective user-to-user relationship-building: libraries should share and borrow ideas from one another. For example, at the Ann Arbor District Library, recurring trivia nights and talks are hosted by the library but held in local bars and cafes. These events draw in young adult

participants who seek to socialize with one another. Another model program is the “science cafe”: at the Oceanside Library in New York, scientists and community members gather for informal conversations (ALA, 2017). Other ideas for relationship-building are mentioned by Matarasso (1998), who offers descriptions of eighteen programs in U.K. libraries that support community. Programs include a group of community members working on local history, weekly toy exchanges and play sessions for families, and a combined youth center and library. Further work is needed to compile a resource of relationship-building programs at public libraries in the US.

Together, these recommendations – gradual change, adjustments to existing programs, recurring series, and exchange of ideas – will strengthen libraries’ contribution to community of relationships among library users. In turn, I believe libraries will find themselves serving as a library community center and engaging with more community members, addressing their users’ desire for connection, and restoring constructive political interaction.

Conclusion

I began this project to identify the range of impacts that public libraries have on their communities. Through that process I observed that that libraries impact individuals and families more than groups and communities, that libraries sustain spatial communities and communities of interest more than communities of relationships, and that libraries build relationships with their users more than they build them among their users. The individualized focus of library services may be a result of historical, cultural, and political factors, but it need not constrain library futures. A renewed focus on building communities of relationships among library users on top of existing strengths in communities of place and interest – what I call a *meeting of the*

minds or the library community center – could invigorate libraries. One manager in the study put her hope this way: “We just celebrated our 150th anniversary last year. I think the popularity of library use is something that is not going away... [Our users] look at libraries as places that care for the needs of human beings... One hundred and fifty years later, people will still be using libraries.”

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