



Evidence Summary

Local Public Libraries Serve Important Functions as Meeting Places, but Demographic Variables Appear Significant, Suggesting a Need for Extensive Further Research

A Review of:

Aabø, S., Audunson, R., & Vårheim, A. (2010). How do public libraries function as meeting places? *Library & Information Science Research*, 32(1), 16-26. doi: 10.1016/j.lisr.2009.07.008.

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Abstract

Objective – The investigators hoped to gain an understanding of the extent to which local public libraries are used by their visitors as meeting places, and in what ways. Furthermore, they sought to determine whether certain demographic variables correlate with variations in these ways of using the library. Finally, they were looking for evidence of a relationship between the degree of the subjects' general community involvement on the one hand, and their participation in various types of meetings in the library on the other.

Design – Questionnaire-based telephone survey.

Setting – Oslo, Norway.

Subjects – 750 adult residents (eighteen years or older) from 3 of Oslo's 15 boroughs.

Methods – The researchers selected these boroughs (not identified in this article and referred to, unusually, as "townships") because they judged them to represent three demographically varying types of urban community. In March of 2006, a professional survey organization drew numbers at random from a database of telephone numbers in each borough, continuing until it had reached the desired number of 250 actual survey respondents, including cell phone users, for each borough. It weighted the sample according to gender and age, and administered the telephone interviews on the basis of a questionnaire which the researchers had

designed to yield quantitative data for ten independent, and seven dependent, variables. Interviewers asked the respondents to answer questions on the basis of their entire recollected personal history of public library use, rather than during a specific defined period.

Six of the independent variables were demographic: borough of residence, occupational category, age category, educational level, cultural/linguistic background (dichotomous: either non-Norwegian or Norwegian), and household income category. The other four were: level of participation in local activities, degree of involvement in community improvement activities, degree to which a subject trusted various community institutions, and frequency of local library use. "Meeting intensity," or the number of different meeting types for which a given subject could remember ever having used the library, was one dependent variable. The others were participation/non-participation in each of the six defined meeting types. The researchers employed hierarchical multiple regression analyses for determining degrees of correlation.

Main Results – "Meeting intensity" correlated significantly and positively not only with frequency of library use in general, but also with the number of local activities participated in and level of involvement in community improvement activities, as well as with non-Norwegian cultural/linguistic background. It correlated significantly and negatively with household income. The investigators report no significant relationship of meeting intensity with occupational or age category, or with level of education. Participation in certain of the defined meeting types did correlate significantly with certain independent variables. Respondents tend to turn to the local public library more for "public sphere" meetings as they grow older. Participation in this kind of meeting is likewise more common among those with a higher level of community involvement and engagement, but also among the lower-income respondents. High-intensive "joint activities" meetings with friends, acquaintances, colleagues or classmates are

especially popular among adults in the lower age categories, as well as among respondents with a lower level of education and with a lower household income. "Virtual" meetings (via library Internet use), also defined as a high-intensive meeting type, are especially popular with the occupational categories "job seeker" and "homemaker," as well as with the younger respondents and with those who have a lower household income. Use of the local public library for both the "virtual" and the "joint-activities" types of meetings is also considerably more common among those with a non-Norwegian cultural/linguistic background. Frequency of library use in general was not related to participation in either of these two types of meetings at the library, but it was related to library use for the more low-intensive meeting types (chance meetings and encounters, library as rendezvous point for joint activities elsewhere), as well as to what the investigators term using the library as a "metameeting place," i.e., a place for finding "information about other arenas and activities" in the local community.

Conclusion – The local public library seems to serve, for many of its patrons, an important function as venue for meetings of various kinds. In general, using it for meeting purposes appears to be something that appeals more to younger than to older adults, more to those in the lower than to those in the higher income categories, and more to those with an immigrant than to those with an indigenous background. The perhaps even less expected finding that use of the library for a relatively intensive, instrumental kind of meeting activity correlates significantly with a lower level of education would particularly suggest a need for further research. Noteworthy, as well, is the apparent fact that those who make use of the local public library as a venue for relatively intensive meeting activity, whether physical or virtual, tend to come to the library expressly for that purpose, and visit the library less often for other reasons than do other library users. The urban districts in which respondents resided were in fact not internally homogeneous enough, nor socio-economically

distinct enough from one another, to yield correlations of practical evidentiary value.

It was the researchers' working assumption that their three independent variables of community engagement – i.e., level of participation in local activities, degree of involvement in community improvement activities, and degree to which one trusts community institutions – can be taken together to represent the amount of a respondent's "social capital." They detected, in general, a positive correlation between the extent of such "social capital" and the use of the library as a meeting place. Neither the strength nor the direction of this relationship was clear, however, from the results of this study: both will have to be explored through further research. "Does the library contribute to generating social capital," they ask, "or is the use of the library as a meeting place a result of pre-existing social capital?" (p. 25) They were hoping at least to discover whether the library, specifically in its role as a low-intensive and "public sphere" meeting place, contributes to the generation of "bridging" social capital between citizens of differing cultural backgrounds, with differing values, viewpoints, and interests. Though their findings did not justify this conclusion, and Skøtt's (2005) study even contradicts it, the researchers nevertheless express their confidence that, while not a genuine "third place" in the sense intended by Oldenburg (1999), "the library as a meeting place plays a substantial role in equalizing the possibilities of being an active citizen across social and economic differences" (p. 25). But however that may be, they are in any case convinced that their questionnaire and categorization scheme for meeting types have now shown their value, and that the grouping of types into "low-intensive" versus "high-intensive" appears to be fruitful. They do concede that their approach still requires more thorough and detailed examination, and that their survey instrument must be further refined and developed.

Commentary

It is likely that this study will prove to be of more practical use to researchers than to library practitioners. In particular, its findings regarding public library use patterns by non-indigenous, by less-educated, by lower-income, and by younger patrons are of interest but will require extensive testing through additional research, in other settings as well as with other, especially qualitative, methods. Highly significant, too, is this study's implicit conclusion that for many who make relatively intensive and instrumental use of the library as place, it would indeed seem still to be an important community institution although presumably not by virtue of the functions and services more traditionally associated with it.

Strangely, that conclusion is not one which the authors themselves formulate, although their data, like those of ABM-utvikling (2008), strongly indicate that it is justified, as in fact Høimyr (2011) likewise suggests. Indeed, it is remarkable that this study takes no account whatsoever of those functions and services, nor of certain other factors which can clearly have a considerable influence on whether, the extent to which, and in what ways, patrons will use a public library as a meeting place. We are told nothing about these local libraries' collections, facilities, size, staffing, or services, and what role those might play. There is no mention of the libraries' policies and procedures, or the extent to which those may be aimed at facilitating or even encouraging the use of library premises for various meeting purposes. We hear nothing, either, about architecture, arrangement, and design, though, as Van Slyck has argued, "A [library] building's plan determines which interactions ... are possible and which are impossible," and the qualities of its interior spaces as well as its furnishings encourage "users to play certain sanctioned roles, while making others seem unthinkable" (2007, p. 221). Surely these factors are, as many have indeed suggested (Breeding, 2011; Cox, Swinbourne, Pip, & Laing, 2000; Johnson, 2010; Klopfer & Nagata, 2011; Ljødal, 2005; May & Black, 2010; Preer, 2001; Servet, 2010; Sin & Kim, 2008; Vårheim, Steinmo, & Ide, 2008; Wahnich, 2011), far from irrelevant to research regarding libraries' use as meeting places? Was it *as libraries* that the

respondents found these libraries to be suitable/attractive/meaningful as meeting places? Could some or all of the types of meeting just as well have taken place in something other than a library? If not, *why* not? What specifically, or what combination of factors, *makes* a library appealing as a meeting place?

Since the present study does not speak to any of these matters, it is difficult to assess to what degree its results actually amount to evidence which might be of use to practicing librarians. Moreover, the sample was not entirely representative; subject self-selection and self-reporting biases were present, as was a degree of language bias; and, oddly, the investigators neglected to establish, even approximately, how often any given respondent had used the library either for meeting purposes altogether or for any specific meeting type. They do not provide a copy of the questionnaire employed. This reader could nonetheless scarcely avoid the impression that some survey questions were multi-interpretable, and some terminology – even some variables – imprecisely defined. This renders it all the more regrettable that the researchers chose to employ a single-method, rather than a triangulated, research design.

How can we adequately measure the societal performance, or calculate the social and community value, of a public library? This is clearly a multifaceted and still unresolved question, but nevertheless an important and probably increasingly crucial one (Calvert, 1994; Debono, 2002; Imholz & Arns, 2007; Klopfer & Nagata, 2011; Koontz, Jue, & Lance, 2005; Linley & Usherwood, 1998; Richter, 2011; State Library, 2005; Wiegand, 2003). In spite of their study's limitations, Aabø and her colleagues quite rightly recognized that at least one important aspect, the library's actual use as meeting place, had hardly ever been the subject of any empirical research or analysis. Their and the ABM-utvikling's (2008) findings on this specific aspect now amount in any case to a welcome, albeit modest, beginning on which further research can build. In the meantime, their study does already at least strongly suggest that the twenty-first century

public library has indeed begun to attract a somewhat differently constituted clientele, serving it in a manner different to the traditional and familiar one. And that in consequence, as some others have already observed (Alstad & Curry, 2003; Bonrepaux, 2010; Breemer, 2011; Cox et al., 2000; Shoham & Yablonka, 2008; Wahnich, 2011; Wiegand, 2003), librarians may well have little choice but to adjust their thinking and their practices accordingly.

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