



Evidence Summary

Public Libraries in Norway Help Non-Western Immigrant Women to Integrate into Society

A Review of:

Audunson, R., Essmat, S., & Aabø, S. (2011). Public libraries: A meeting place for immigrant women? *Library & Information Science Research*, 33(3), 220-227. doi: 10.1016/j.lisr.2011.01.003

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Abstract

Objectives – To discover the ways in which the public library was used by immigrant women, with a particular focus on the library as a meeting place.

Design – Semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in the participants' native languages.

Setting – Public libraries in Norway. Participants lived in one of two cities both with a population of approximately 40,000 and a somewhat lower number of immigrants than the national average.

Subjects – Nine non-western women who had immigrated to Norway between 8 months and 17 years prior to the study. Three women were

from Iran, Kurdistan and Afghanistan respectively. All identified themselves as public library users.

Methods – Participants were interviewed in their native languages and the qualitative results were analyzed in accordance with the theoretical framework set out by the authors. The main areas of focus were the role of the library in the generation of social capital, and the library as a high intensive versus low intensive meeting place.

Main Results – Participants used public libraries in various ways. In the initial stages of life in a new country they were used to observe and learn about the majority culture and language. They were also used as a safe place to openly grieve and provide comfort among close

friends without fear of being seen by other fellow countrymen. Over time, participants came to use the library space in more traditional ways such as for information, social, and professional needs. The study also revealed that using public libraries built trust in the institution of libraries and librarians as employees.

Conclusions – The public library plays a key role in the generation of social capital, both in terms of integrating into the majority culture through observation and spontaneous interactions (bridging social capital) and connecting with others from participants' home cultures (bonding social capital) for example through the provision of social space and other links to home such as native language materials. The public library was used initially by participants as a high intensive meeting place, for meeting with friends and consoling one another. In time, however, the public library became a medium- to low-intensive meeting place, with participants engaging in library programmes or in spontaneous interactions with other library customers. Moreover, the study refutes the Swedish Library Association's conclusion that library is used more often by immigrants that have lived in the country for long periods of time.

Commentary

This study was conducted as part of the PLACE project (Public Libraries, Arenas for Citizenship), a four year project which ends in April 2012. The PLACE project focuses on the role of public libraries in the generation of social capital and cross-cultural communication in Norway. Each of the three authors is involved with the wider project; Audunson is leading the project, Aabø is part of the project team, and Essmat's Master's thesis formed the basis for this article. One of the authors is fluent in the three languages spoken by the women in this study (Farsi, Dari and Kurdish) and thus participants were interviewed in their native language. This adds greatly to the study, since it prevented any linguistic barriers which may have made it difficult for the women to complete the interview.

The study is well-organized, with detailed explanations of the theoretical framework that includes social capital as well as high- and low-intensive meeting places. The study's procedures are clearly explained, from the selection of participants to the structure of the interviews. The description of the data analysis could have been more detailed, however. The main themes are given with illustrative quotes, but few references are made to the number of participants who made certain comments. The article would be more accessible for readers if appendices had been included, such as the interview questions used, a matrix showing the theoretical framework, and a taxonomy of participant quotes which had elicited the themes described. Inclusion of this additional information would have strengthened an already strong study. Another aspect omitted by the authors was information as to whether any steps were taken to eliminate interview bias. This is especially important in the context of the long-running PLACE study, which all of the authors are involved in, and previous findings could have affected the interviewer's expectations of what the findings might be.

There were nine participants in total, three each from Iran, Afghanistan and Kurdistan. The authors mention the difficulty of recruiting a larger group of participants, and in light of the fact that this was an exploratory study, the number of participants appears to be satisfactory. The authors also mention the intention to follow-up with quantitative and qualitative research on a larger sample in an area with a higher percentage of immigrants in a future study. However, the authors do not provide ideas or suggestions for successfully engaging a much larger sample. An interesting angle for future work would be to contrast library users with non-library users to find out what factors encourage or discourage immigrant women from using the public library. Other possibilities include investigating the effect of public librarians intentionally becoming more aware of the cultures they serve, and a more in-depth study of the possibilities of librarians helping immigrant women to find health information.