

Public Libraries: enacting “public spaces” for community development and lifelong learning

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Public libraries in Hamilton provide countless services to different users, particularly older immigrants. The library system proves to be an inclusive learning space, promoting lifelong learning for all. The paper explores the relationship between public library use, lifelong learning and community development. In addition, it demonstrates the function of the library in the provision of equal and universal access to information and learning. This paper focuses on a qualitative interview materials. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 participants (13 females and 12 males) in six public libraries in Hamilton, Ontario. In addition, we interviewed six library staff in the six public libraries (three in the lower Hamilton and three in the suburban Mountain) and conducted observations of the day-to-day practices in the six public libraries. Purposive sampling was used to ensure diversity in library use. Using the grounded theory (GT) method, interviews were transcribed, coded, categorized, and analyzed using NVivo 10. The interviews explored the viewpoints of participants accessing public libraries in Hamilton. The findings reveal that public libraries are sources of educational, informational, and well-being – providing lifelong learning through library activities and programs. Specifically, the acquisition of new skills and new friendship through the library space is a vibrant resource for developing the adult learner’s capacity for social development in the community and the world at large. The study would be one of a kind to deploy library users’ narrations for interrogating public library spaces as a tool for understanding spaces of lifelong learning in Ontario, Canada. It highlights the many ways in which social relationships through library use shape perception, attitude and learning. Different users of public libraries attain a sense of accomplishment for different reasons. This paper, therefore, calls for a policy approach in which the diverse experiences of public libraries are more widely recognized and nurtured.

Introduction

A strong library system is a cornerstone of a strong community. It provides positive social impact on communities by contributing to education, literacy and lifelong learning for residents. Ontario’s Public Libraries Act (1966) is the key piece of legislation governing Ontario’s public libraries. It supports the provision of equal and universal access to information and establishes free public library services in Ontario through governance and regulations. In human development systems, what is the function of public libraries in the provision of equal and universal access to information? In what ways do public libraries support personal development, adult learning, and community empowerment? In what ways do public libraries promote well-being and act to maintain a sense of social cohesion in communities? While many researchers (Buschman, 2003; McCabe, 2001; Matarasso, 1998) have speculated on the importance of public libraries and proclaimed to be significant in the promotion of learning, there is little strong empirical evidence to confirm the role

they may play in promoting well-being through lifelong education, and as sites of socio-cultural development.

Lifelong learning has become important to all people in this information age due to free access to information. For adults, particularly newcomers, who could not continue their education in the formal educational institutions, public libraries are important alternative sites of learning and offer adults flexible learning opportunities and supporting the learning process (Abumandour, 2020). Public libraries serve as community hubs for learning experiences through the coordination of support services, such as English as a second language (ESL) classes, computer literacy classes, free access to internet, books and other educational materials. This shows that learning can take place outside an educational institution, but can happen anywhere including public libraries. Similarly, Nielsen (2014) argues that the self-directed learning experience in the library promotes active citizenship participation and employability, enabling people to participate in all aspects of social, political and economic life.

The value of the public library is well understood. Learning is strongly linked with library use. For example, it

is established that libraries support reading, and strong reading habits enhance skills required in the 21st century workplace, such as high literacy and analytical thinking (Bayard, 2006). Public libraries support the information, educational, cultural and recreational needs of adults in communities through access to books and online resources. Quality library facilities not only enhance the quality of life, but also a chance to progress, seize opportunities and gain more satisfaction and enjoyment, and support the engagement with development of social well-being of the community (Brewster, 2014; Lippman et al. 2011). The benefits of public libraries should be accessible to all, however supporting a range of social activities at the same time is not always easy. For the advantages of multiple uses to be maximized, it is crucial that communities have the right mechanisms in place to ensure that different users alike are effectively incorporated into the library system.

The importance of investing in social development to improve lifelong learning for all is becoming increasingly recognized (Balapanidou, 2015). In our globalized economy, where informational and technological development is advancing at a fierce pace, public libraries have a huge impact on the capacity of users to react and respond to opportunities (Usherwood, 2002). In this battle for information and technology, public libraries in particular may offer a significant comparative advantage to different users, as long as their potential is harnessed. The aim of the paper is to expand on an existing work on library use through an analysis of public libraries as sites for promoting lifelong learning. In addition, the paper explores the extent to which public libraries can be regarded as sites of control. Important questions remain about the extent to which public libraries work to establish control over individual conduct, such as filtering of online resources and acceptable use policies (Muir, Cooke, Creaser, and Spezi, 2017).

Public libraries

Libraries increasingly provide the context for communities of difference, and they have brought learning to the forefront of these debates as sites of empowerment and lifelong learning (Lippman, Moore, and McIntosh, 2011). Many studies have shown that the public library is used in many different ways by different users. We need to deepen our understanding about the ways in which public libraries meet diverse needs of users, the extent to which public libraries are shared and may influence social capital, community cohesion, relaxation, and the implications for lifelong learning. For example, Kretzman and Rans (2005) found that public libraries contribute to community development by providing free community space, technological resources, connections to the local economy, a sense of ownership by the community, and a high level of

community trust. 'Well-being', has been described as 'positive health' or 'a state of physical, mental and social well-being' (WHO, 1948, p. 100). Well-being is understood as a dimension of socio-ecological model of health, which locates individual experience within social contexts and allows for individual's interpretation of them. As some researchers put it, this perspective focuses on what promotes and protects health, rather than on what causes illness (Blaxter, 1990; Bowling, 1991; Gattrell, Thomas, Bennett, Bostock, Popay, Williams, and Shahtahmasebi, 2000). Studies have shown that public libraries impact communities by their social, educational and cultural roles, and by developing confidence in individuals and the communities, thus a positive social impact on their communities (Usherwood, 2002; Debono, 2002). Well-being, according to eco-psychologists, is a balance between met and unmet needs; they include social and emotional needs and needs for self-actualization (Pickering, 2001). It also involves feeling good, not only about ourselves, but about our social relationships, within families, between peers, and in communities (Keyes, 2002). Similarly, the social dimension of the public library is found to be substantial. For example, the importance of the library as a place to visit in order to relieve isolation, and the relation many users report that they have to their peers and library staff have been documented (Johnson, 2010; Johnson and Griffis, 2009). According to Neil Germain, public libraries are places about freedom: freedom to read, freedom of ideas, and freedom of communication (Germain, 2013). Public libraries are found to contribute to local communities by fostering imagination, creativity, personal development, and by strengthening local culture and identity, social cohesion and community empowerment (Buschman, 2003; McCabe, 2001; Matarasso, 1998).

Public libraries offer freedom of access to information services through books, digital resources and expertise that are accessible to everyone. For example, internet access in public libraries provides a means for users without access at home or work to access commercial and governmental services and information (Cooke, 2007). Socio-economic factors are important social determinants of public library use. Work on a library's internet access has shown that internet use is usually common amongst adults with low income who access the internet in "libraries, on mobile devices, and another person's home...whereas work and home access are more common amongst the higher income groups" (Dutton and Blank, 2011, p.10). Aside from direct internet access, public libraries also offer resources for training. Exploring the implications of the public libraries and the internet, Jaeger et al. (2006) found that in the United States, ICT training is provided in libraries for seniors (57.3 percent), users with no access to internet at home (52.6 percent) and adults pursuing continuing education (51.2

percent). The availability of these resources and tools in the public libraries provide opportunities where adults continue to learn to use these resources, and helps broaden their relationships in the community (Lopez, Caspe, and McWilliams, 2016).

Perception of the public library as a place of safety and trusted has been addressed by a number of scholars (e.g., Cooke, Spacey, and Muir, 2014; Denesen, 2013). Library staff work to create a perception of the public library as place for users that offers accurate information (Colaric, 2003). In addition to providing training and assistance, library staff provide services, such as screen monitors and emergency responders (Kinney, 2010), leading to trust in libraries, which is essential for individual well-being and societal development. Social trust and social capital are created through both social contacts and actors' impartial (Cooke, 2007) as well as open safe place (Varheim, 2014; Schyns and Koop, 2010). Other research has found that internet use in public libraries is governed by terms and conditions which indicate what a user may or may not be viewed whilst using the Internet. This regulation compliments other mechanisms, including usual monitoring of screens (Spacey, Muir, Cooke, Creaser, and Spezi, 2017), producing and sustaining social meaning; as a means to control and mystify, and as a method used to control library space. In this sense, Cooke et al. (2014) argue that in managing access to library internet connection, library regulators need to balance their legal regulations and see to the ethical issues emerging from meeting the needs of different users of their communities.

Given the array of power dynamics inherent in library practices, “power relations are central” (Mowforth and Munt, 2009, p. 48) to any critical treatment of library users. Although library literature raises important points about power relations in library encounters, they often fall short of deploying these findings to address broader political questions regarding differences and encounters in general. McKechnie, Dixon, Fear, and Pollak (2006) conducted an exploratory observation study in two central libraries and seven library branches in Canada. The aim was to study user behaviour in relation to the rules of conduct in the libraries. Rules and regulations in the libraries are designed to govern acceptable use of facilities and ensure fair, equitable access for all; and an enabling environment that is respectful for everyone. The study revealed that the majority of the library users follow the posted code of conduct, but also observed many incidents of rule breaking. Library staff often used passive strategies to monitor user behaviour. Other library users were more frequently seen intervening to negotiate and restrain inappropriate behaviours. In general, the researchers concluded that public libraries function as public places governed by shared normative assumptions of public order. In a related study of a British University library to

explore the students' use of a new large, open workspace that had been redeveloped from the entrance area in the library, Bryant, Matthews, and Walton (2009) found that the open-plan space was a popular area, supporting a range of student activities in a flexible learning environment. It was observed that majority of the students were conducting academic work and social activities at the same time. The library's rule of conduct was seen to govern behaviour in the area. Most users behaved considerably toward others and used the open space with respect. A few users were noisier and disturbed others; however, this behaviour was rarely challenged. In all the studies, the library emerged as a complex public place, where behaviours used by library users and staff were contested, negotiated and reconstructed to suit their purposes.

This paper explores the interconnections between public libraries and the promotion of lifelong learning. Public libraries are fundamental features of cities. As Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) once noted, “a library outranks any one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never-failing spring in the desert.” Public libraries represent the values of liberal democracy, open access to knowledge and equality. Apparently, they are places that are accessible to everyone, and where difference is encountered and negotiated (Young, 1990).

Setting and context

The paper draws on a qualitative research to explore participants' use and experience of public libraries in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Hamilton is a medium-sized city in Ontario about 75 kilometers southwest of Toronto, and it is comprised of six communities: Ancaster, Stoney Creek, Dundas, Flamborough, Glanbrook and Hamilton. With a population of 742,925 in 2015, the city is ranked 5th largest in the province of Ontario and 10th in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017; World Population Review, 2019), with 25% of its residents born outside of Canada and 12.5% as visible minorities (City of Hamilton, 2010-2015). Hamilton has been labeled as the ‘Steeltown’ of Canada. However, the city has undergone major economic changes and is now recognized for its health care and education sectors (Freeman, 2001; Barber, 2004; Russ, 2007), with several large libraries as well as educational institutions including McMaster University and Mohawk College.

Hamilton is a diverse city, home to successful newcomers and immigrants. Physically divided by Niagara escarpment which runs east-west through the city, poverty is most severe in the lower city, and particularly in the downtown core as compared to the western communities of Ancaster and Dundas. The population also includes recent refugees and immigrants. While the downtown core has been the traditional entry point for lower income groups, large

numbers of middle income and higher income groups have settled in suburban communities of Hamilton, including its ‘mountain’ neighbourhoods. Even though, there are large public parks and shopping centres for residents in the communities, it is not uncommon to see many of the residents accessing public libraries throughout the year. Observations like these provided the impetus to select Hamilton in which to explore peoples’ experiences of accessing public libraries. Hamilton is currently the setting for major health and educational projects and research in Ontario, accompanied with increased in library use, having the potential to change the landscape in Hamilton and this study is interested to explore the experiences of these library users.

Methods

This paper focuses on qualitative interview materials. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 participants (13 females and 12 males) in six public libraries in Hamilton, Ontario. In addition, we interviewed six library staff in the six public libraries (three in the lower Hamilton and three in the suburban Mountain) and conducted observations of the day-to-day practices in the six public libraries. Purposive sampling was used to ensure diversity in library use. These libraries were selected from a number of public libraries with the aim to include different groups of people as well as geographical and socio-economic characteristics. Participants were selected from these public libraries based on their availability as they accessed the libraries. All participants were regularly accessing the public libraries (i.e., daily, weekly, etc) at the time of the interviews. Researchers set up meetings in advance with library staff of the public libraries and requested a chance to interview users accessing their libraries. Participant interviews took the form of their telling about their library use and the importance of accessing public libraries in the city. The interviews were conducted by the researcher in English and lasted from 50 to 90 minutes, with an average interview time of 73 minutes. Using the grounded theory (GT) method interviews were transcribed, coded, categorized, and analyzed. The interviews explored the viewpoints of participants accessing public libraries in Hamilton. The GT approach provided systematic, but flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing the qualitative data. Interviews included written field notes, observations, and one-on-one conversations with the participants. This process also included audio-recording tapes and field notes (Turner, 2010). The information collected was subsequently transcribed, and the data were classified, coded, and interpreted in line with the GT methodology (Charmaz, 2006). The GT begins with inductive data, making it possible of going back and forth between data and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). As I coded the

interview scripts, several initial codes indicated promising leads: accessibility and lifelong learning advantages to improving well-being (e.g., place to read, continue one’s unfinished education); congruence between library space/services and users’ views of library space and the role of technology and programs (e.g., access to internet, and improved language skills), the relationship between library staff and library users on one hand and the dynamics of personal and interpersonal control mechanisms in the library space on the other hand.

The data were collected between June 2017 and September 2017. All interviews were anonymized and stored on a secure server available only to the researcher. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants and public libraries to protect confidentiality. In analyzing all interviews, three researchers read and identified key themes including place, learning, support and networks, social control, emotional, relaxation, and sense of place emerged as important themes when reading, coding, and re-reading the breadth of our interviews and observations. This paper uses individual narratives of accessing public libraries in various communities to reveal how participants and library staff navigate their libraries with similar and different expectations. Individual narratives were selected and screened so as to offer insights into lifelong learning experience of library users. But as Geertz (1995) noted, “The Field” itself is a “powerful force: assertive, demanding, even coercive” so that the political and research contexts are critical for interpretation. Notwithstanding these complexities, narratives can be meaningful offering windows on a complex world (Mills, 1959).

Findings

For library staff and library users in Hamilton, Ontario, building a library was the result of the city’s desire to make a place for not only learning, but for bringing the community together. This paper explores people’s narratives about library use in order to critically consider the potential benefits of library space upon lifelong learning and adult learning experience as well as shaping the conduct of users, both in direct sense and as mediated by social interactions. Although many library users discussed the importance of public libraries to their social, educational and economic lives – as places to read or study, relax, participate in informal leisure activities, meet others, their benefit lay more in the shared and social elements of library space.

The public library sets out equality of conditions/resources that we believe are essential for promoting equality in education. For example, the library provides the adult learner the opportunity to work and learn. The objective of the public library providing equality in learning is to ensure that everyone in the community has

engaging and satisfying learning – learning that develops them as people. This includes the whole range of sites of learning, not just formal educational institutions. Some participants came to the library to find space and other resources to engage in personal or group studies in a quest to improve their knowledge or develop themselves as adults:

We have a bunch of programs for users. For example, we have adult literacy education for immigrants, who would like to improve on their language, communication and information skills (Library Staff)

As immigrant, I join conversation groups which the library organizes to improve immigrants/newcomers’ English language and to meet new people (Library User).

I come here to read a lot of books in order to have more knowledge on the program I wish to pursue. This is a place to get all the information you need to continue your education – free access to computer and internet and training services help to expose you to different ideas (Library User).

The library provides training services that help us with resume preparation, with interviews skills, interpersonal skills and how to prepare for job interviews (Library User).

The library is a public place, open to all, used for private and individual projects. As usual, many participants talked about how the vibrant study space played a positive role in learning, writing and reading:

The library gives opportunity to people who don’t have internet at home. It provides free Wi-Fi internet access services, facilitating access to information for all and protecting people from harm. It provides a safe and trusted space for users (Library Staff).

I’m really here for two reasons. One of which is to do my assignment as I am always required to do as a student. I share my room with another friend so the library is a nice place to do your work, free access to internet (Wi-Fi) and stuff. And to be honest, the other reason is, I’m just simply here to make new friends, especially to meet new girlfriends (Library User).

I’m writing a proposal as part of my application to a university. I come regularly to read, get some references to write my proposal and also to connect to

other people. I usually come with some friends but today I came here alone (Library User).

For many library users, however, library spaces that brought people together and where friendship and support networks were made and maintained were fundamental to a general sense of well-being. Interestingly, library users described public library space in terms of their interaction with other people. They could alleviate tensions from home, get information from books, newspapers and online materials using the library’s internet services. Also, the library space and other facilities in the public libraries provide users a sense of place, giving users the opportunity to be part of the community, fostering a sense of inclusiveness, which adds to the general quality of community life. Participants expressed how library spaces offer them the opportunity to share ideas, views, and information and interact with other families:

It is safe and family oriented here. I see lots of families here on Saturdays. The library has less crime and cleaner than other spaces...People feel safe enough to allow their kids to move around and interact with other families (Library Staff)

Saturdays are apparently the day for family visits to the library. Families get together to have a good time and interact with neighbours, to find materials in the collections – DVD’s and toys for the kids (Library User).

I grew up in this neighbourhood. I call this library my second home. I come here every time I want to relax, read newspapers, and to talk to friends (Library User).

The social and physical spaces are closely intertwined, forming a strong attachment where the physical space provides avenue for people to interact with each other. Although many library users discussed the importance of public libraries to their life – as places to read, write, participate in informal leisure activities, and meet others, their benefit lay more in the shared social elements of library space. For most newcomers or singles especially, such spaces could provide the avenue to meeting new people. Participants expressed how public libraries offer them the opportunity to interact:

I have been coming here since I came to Canada. I meet a lot of friends in the library. You always see people standing and chatting in front of the library and at the parking lot rather than reading, or doing something in the library; entering into conversation with friends, strangers

and encounters with people different from oneself (Library User).

People are friendly, as a library staff they might asked you for help on how to search or find some information in the library. In that sense you get to know people. We meet different cultures, especially newcomers asking for help in the library (Library Staff).

Social interaction in and around the library can provide relief from daily routines, foster a sense of community belonging, which have a direct influence on lifelong learning. Research emphasizes that sustained casual interaction is the most beneficial; however, even superficial contacts can contribute to more tolerant attitudes and an improvement in the degree to which people positively value difference by changing perceptions of normality (Wessel, 2009, p. 12).

Aside for their academic and other social qualities, public libraries offer chances for people to be alone. Public libraries provide people the opportunity to temporary escape from work, friends, families and other related activities in order to take time out for them to reflect. Some of the library users interviewed talked about access to privacy in the library that they were unable to find at home or in other places:

I love being in the library...Doing hot weathers, if I don't feel like going to the Mall, the library is a place I come quite a lot. It keeps me from being shopaholic. It takes you out of the pressures of the mall to shop (Library User).

I come here every Saturday just to take time out for myself, be away from work, friends and families. This is the only time you find to be alone and think about other important things in life (Library User).

As Simmel noted (Wolffe, 1950), people sometimes just want to get away from the hustle and bustle of life. Public libraries, therefore, can also provide the chance to escape from pressures of domestic life. Work in Environmental Psychology, which focuses on mechanisms involved in stress recovery and positive mood change for example, has identified restorative benefits of places in community, features as place identity, a sense of attachment and residential satisfaction (Korpela and Hartig, 1996; Korpela, Hartig, Kaiser, and Fuhrer et al., 2001).

Alongside relations with library staff and other users, library spaces are sites where members learn to take care of themselves, albeit the rules of conduct. For example, library users emphasized that the rules and regulations allow them to refrain from other activities that are against the functioning and well-being of the library. At one library, a

library staff talked about particular importance of library space for the users. When asked how library staff handle issues of misconduct that come to their attention, she recounts:

We don't necessarily interfere with users' privacy, because we know that everyone knows the rules and regulations. We offer advice to users on best practices in the library if need be. Everyone has an equal responsibility to make sure that we have a peaceful and respectful environment. However, deliberate and consistence engagement in certain practices is not entertained at all (Library Staff).

Library functioning relies on peer surveillance to ensure that users conduct themselves in a manner acceptable by the rules and regulations. The findings suggest that public library users are made to accept these regulations to maintain public libraries as safe and trusted spaces in the community.

This place is very cool. The rules and regulations help us to comport ourselves, tolerate others. It's like everyone is watching you so always try to do the right thing (Library User).

This statement corroborates with a study in the UK by McKechnie et al. (2006), which revealed that the majority of the library users follow the posted code of conduct, but library staff often used passive strategies to monitor use behaviour. Also, other library users were more frequently seen intervening to negotiate and restrain inappropriate behaviours. In general, the researchers concluded that public libraries function as public places governed by shared normative assumption of public order. Another feature of the public library relates to the extent to which library spaces are created for 'working on oneself' in which library users are taught to reassert control over their conduct so that they can carry out their own responsibilities in society.

I come here strictly because I can't sit for more than 30 minutes to study when I'm home. But sometimes, I'm able to do more than four hours when I'm in the library. It helps take your mind from other stuff. It actually regulates my studies by controlling my time (Library User).

It would appear that library users understand and accept regulations regarding public library usage. In a sense, regulations by authorities prompt us to consider how community spaces shape users social-related conduct in the

interests of producing healthy and vibrant community for lifelong learning.

Discussion and conclusion

Over a century ago, Carnegie (1835-1919) asserted that the library represents one of the major things a community can do to benefit its people. Today, public libraries represent important places across a range of locales and regions. The findings of this study support the contention that public libraries are sources of educational, informational and well-being. Authors such as Malloch (1989) and Agyekum and Newbold (2016) have suggested that well-being requires that an individual live in harmony with others in their community. The findings of this exploratory research provide important insight into the effects of interactions amongst users of public libraries on individual and community life. As noted by Laws and Radford (1998), places, which may include public libraries, are centres of social relations and practices that operate amongst different users. Thus, these social relations shape both the experiences of place and an individual's sense of self that are both central to individual's development. Additionally, increase in sense of security when people are surrounded by people with identities (Popay, Thomas, Williams, Bennett, Gattrell, & Bostock, 2003) promotes social cohesion. This is consistent with other studies that have documented how social cohesion influences well-being by enhancing the mutual exchange of resources and information (Kearns and Forrest, 2000; Wilkinson, 1997).

The results contribute to the literature studying adult experiences in public libraries, and by providing information on how different users engage in lifelong learning through library activities and programs. First, understanding the socio-economic characteristics of adult library users is critical to understanding the needs of community members. This research has shown that a number of users accessed the public library primarily to use the Internet in order to access electronic or digital information. Some of the reasons may be due to the lack of access at home, workplace or other public places in the community. To understand this phenomenon, more research is needed on the socio-economic effects on library internet use. The results indicate that library managers should focus attention on improving not only the quality of library staff and materials, but also internet access at the library in order to stimulate more diverse public library use. This may have implications for the choice of neighbourhoods or communities of living. For example, low-income groups and students may choose to live in close proximity to public libraries with the intention to get access to the Internet. Second, the analysis suggests that changing perception of, and responses to public library use offer a fertile ground for

further studies by social scientists. This study contributes to the conceptual development of the community development literature in terms of the security, comfort and trust that public libraries offer as spaces of well-being in the community. In one way, interventions by library regulators and staff to bring sanity into the library's environment can be argued as efforts to provide a sustainable, healthy, vibrant and peaceful communities. This result corroborates with Spacey et al.'s assertion that public libraries are public institutions providing education and social services, and therefore have corporate responsibilities to protect their users (Spacey et al., 2017).

Public libraries act as a form of individual and community empowerment (Caidi, 2006), providing lifelong learning through library activities and programs. Participants consider the public library as a place to acquire a number of new skills that shape their learning experiences and job opportunities. Acquisition of new skills and new friendship in the library space is a vibrant resource for developing the adult learner's capacity for social development in the community and the world at large. The public library provides informal learning spaces for the acquisition of knowledge and the development of social capital through interactions. It has been suggested that specific place characteristics can influence the amount of social capital within a locality (Gattrell et al., 2000). Social capital can be derived from 'bonding', supportive, ties between people of a community, while bridging capital connects individuals to dissimilar groups and additional resources (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000); carrying different implications for equality and well-being in the community.

The library's social qualities were discussed. Public libraries were places where people felt comfortable to mingle, aspect of the public space, which participants recounted as serene, enjoyable and relatively free. For example, people tolerated others. Living in a less tolerant area has been associated with poorer self-rated health (Stafford, Cummins, MacIntyre, Ellaway, and Marmot, 2005), whilst tolerance is an important pre-condition for widening networks and for a more inclusive social capital (Cattell, 2004). Specifically, public libraries emerged as sites for social development in the community. Some people demand educational or informational benefits from the opportunities provided by spaces to study, read and write, but for many others, it was their social value, their shared collective use which was instrumental both in promoting equality in education and for maintaining well-being.

I join scholars who embrace these expansive understanding of public libraries. Given that the public library can play a role in encouraging healthy lifestyles through its codes of conduct; public libraries can be seen as a key aspect of the spatialization of community development

and lifelong learning. Beyond the rules and regulations in the public libraries, the security issues, filtering of Wi-Fi access and acceptable use policy, the occasional interventions by library staff and other users can be interpreted as efforts to create a healthy space for users – community development. In managing access to internet and acceptable use of library resources, library staff have to deal with the ethical dilemmas arising from meeting diverse needs of users (Cooke et al. 2014).

This article has deployed library users’ narrations for interrogating public libraries spaces as a tool for understanding spaces of lifelong learning and social relations. The research demonstrates that the practices and relations within public libraries bring to light the varying nature of interactions through multiple initiatives. Scholars of library studies must be attentive to the ways in which social relationships shape social life and lifelong experiences amongst people in a community. Understanding that different users of public libraries will achieve their goals for different reasons, policy makers must take into account a holistic approach of understanding these. Further research is needed to gain insight into the mechanisms through which regulations of access to library resources shape the relationship between public libraries and learning. Though this exploratory study is brief, it suggests that the landscape of public libraries is complex and multifaceted. While the specificity of the case limits the study’s ability to generalize, an analysis of this space does offer insights into broader trends characterizing the public library system. What is called for here is not an abandonment of work that has proven its usefulness to a library’s policy initiative, but for new perspectives that a public library is inherently lifelong because of the diverse opportunities it offers (e.g., promoting social networks and cohesion in communities) and as a process.

This study has implications for promoting lifelong learning in our communities. Adults’ participation in library use could provide them the required knowledge and skills in information and technology, attitude, advancement in learning, and self-discipline and promotion. Further, with access to the Internet, public libraries may play a critical role in developing and expanding access to e-learning education in this COVID-19 era (see Proudfoot & Kebritchi, 2017). By so doing, many adults would have access to life chances and make themselves and their communities vibrant and sustainable. It demonstrates once again that the social and the physical are intimately intertwined and brought together to study library behaviour in particular environments and places. The main facet has been the diversity and variation of public library use. Library users include people of different age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-cultural backgrounds. Research on public libraries may explore how

age, gender, education, income and proximity influence public library use.

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Appendix A

Library Staff Interview Guide

1. Please tell me a bit about yourself
2. How do you recruit library users?
3. What kind of support programs do you run?
4. How do you view the library space in terms supporting lifelong learning
5. Does the library promote a sense of well-being for users?
6. What are your impressions of library users?
7. Do you interact with library users? What kind of contact do you have with them?
8. How are library users monitored and controlled?
9. How do you evaluate the overall library space?

Appendix B

Library Users Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
2. How did you hear about this library?
3. How were you recruited?
4. What led you to use this library? Are you in any of the programs?
5. How has the use of the library space shaped your learning, personal conduct and social life?
6. How has access to the library space influenced your use of technology and the Internet?
7. Do you interact with other library users? Why and why not? Do you trust them?
8. What are some of the social benefits of using the library space?
9. What factors do you think contribute to the use of the library space?
10. How does the library space shape the attitude and behaviours of library users?
11. Should library use be promoted in the community?
12. How would you rate the overall library space for promoting learning and well-being in the community?