

Working Paper 9

Images of Exclusion: User and Community Perceptions of the Public Library

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Abstract

The paper examines how disadvantaged groups, communities and individuals use and perceive the public library. It reviews recent research on the use of, and attitudes towards, public libraries by working class and disadvantaged people and on perceptions of the value and impact of the public library in poor and excluded communities. It is argued that there are limits to libraries' perceived social roles, as these are associated with individual projects, rather than "mainstream" services. The paper considers conflicting claims about the relevance of the public library to excluded groups and classes, referring to evidence of non users' perceptions of the institutional culture of libraries. Specifically, it makes the case that it is an aspirant minority of working class people who particularly use and value library services. The final section of the paper argues that there is inadequate research evidence about "excluded" non-users' perceptions of library services and their information and library related needs. Research and communication strategies focusing on disadvantaged communities and client groups are examined. It is concluded that research has an important role in shifting the institutional core of the public library service and innovating newer social roles, particularly as a way of identifying the reading and information needs of disadvantaged people (August, 1999).

1. Introduction

Public library services in the United Kingdom are often justified through an appeal to the idea that they cater equally for all classes and sectors of society. Usherwood (1996, p.81) claims that the public library "is valued by all sections of society" and, citing the social historian Raphael Samuel, he argues that "public libraries, unlike other major cultural institutions, have been from the start user-friendly... ministering to what, in any given period, has been and astonishingly heterogeneous public" (Samuel, 1992). However, such claims have been, and are, subject to dispute. In the 1960s Luckham (1971, p.109) concluded that "libraries were effectively used by a small minority" and more recently Roach and Morrison (1998, p.7) have argued that "a social distance exists between the public library and ethnic minority communities which tends to *exclude* ethnic minority citizens". Many of the other papers in this series, of course, point to the continuing tendency of public libraries to establish institutional cultures which neglect, and in some cases alienate, disadvantaged social groups and classes.

This paper, however, specifically seeks to explore and critique these debates more closely through an examination of how disadvantaged groups, communities and individuals use and perceive the public library. It will attempt to review recent research regarding (a) the use of

public libraries by working class and disadvantaged people (b) attitudes towards the public library among working class and disadvantaged people (c) perceptions of the value and impact of the public library in poor and excluded communities. As a conclusion to this first part of the paper, it will aim to explore some of the reasons the conflicting claims about the relevance of the public library to excluded groups and classes, in particular with reference to the concept of social mobility.

As far as possible an attempt will be made to explore the views of “non users” of public libraries, as well as users. However, what will fairly immediately become clear to the reader is the relative inadequacy of research / evidence about how “excluded” “non-users” perceive library services, or even, indeed, their own library related needs. Because of this, a final section of the paper will attempt to examine various research and communication strategies focusing on disadvantaged communities and client groups and, in the second part of the paper, some recommendations will be made about future research strategies both at a local and a more generic level.

2. Social impact: progress and inclusion?

The starting point of our review is recent mainstream research on the social impact of the public library beginning with the Comedia Research (1993). Much of this has attempted to portray a positive picture of the service as an evolving, developing institution gradually widening its appeal and social reach. The Comedia researchers themselves, approaching the public library from outside the library profession, were impressed that “the library audience as a whole has a wider social base and the library is more successful than other cultural institutions in attracting use across social class” (Comedia, 1993, p.9). The ASLIB researchers involved in the 1995 *Public Library Review* similarly talked up the reach of the public library claiming that “three fifths of the English and Welsh population regularly visit public libraries”, amounting to a numerical estimate of 24 million adult users (ASLIB, 1995, p.9). They emphasise that “library users include people from all classes and ages and from many sectors of society... users with disabilities, difficulties in learning and a distinct cultural background all value public library services” (p.154). Moreover, the ASLIB researchers claim that, in their attitude surveys, “public libraries generally are perceived favourably by all categories of respondent” (p.139). Most *users* also felt, according to the researchers, that public libraries had substantially improved over the last five years or so. Commentators like Bob Usherwood also point to further specific evidence pointing to the relevance of public libraries to working class and disadvantaged people: he cites research by the Book Marketing Research Board in 1992 which found that 27% of frequent users of the public library come from social classes D or E (Usherwood, 1996, p.81).

What do working class and disadvantaged people think of libraries, and how are they valuable to them? In 1993, Usherwood compiled a booklet celebrating national library week entitled *Success Stories: Libraries are Full of Them* in which a mix of Yorkshire celebrities and the not so famous, many with working class roots, commented at length on what libraries had meant to them in terms of education, life changes and so on. These extracts make fascinating reading, in the main because their dominant discourse is transparently one of individual improvement and enlightenment and what Alan Bennett sums up as “the theme of escape” (Usherwood, 1993, p.6). Richard Hoggart's contribution to the booklet is one of the most explicit: comparing Hunslet Public Library to his grammar school, he describes it as a “wonderful air-hole.... it had a

student's study room and books, more books than I had ever seen in one place before. I haunted both the shelves and the study room and began to discover literature and learning for myself" (Usherwood, 1993, p. 13). For Hoggart, the key purpose of the library, for a bright working class boy like himself, is individual enlightenment, escape to a wider world, and social mobility. Such values, of course, were fundamental to mid century British social democracy and still, for many constitute the fundamental rationale of the public library service. Usherwood's booklet is full of "ordinary" users who voice similar sentiments, albeit in a less lofty style, to those of Hoggart.

Some of the social impact researchers have been concerned to illustrate the benefits of the public library by the gathering of richer, qualitative data which attempts to specify in much more detail the value of library services to deprived and disadvantaged users and communities. Time and again, informants tell the same story: people value libraries because they provide avenues to individual development and social mobility. Linley and Usherwood (1998), in research in inner city Newcastle, find that such perceptions often revolve around life stories: "I just learned a hell of a lot from the library... at one time I wouldn't talk to you like this because I couldn't, but with using the library as much as I did it brought me out you know" (p.31). Other perceptions, especially among working class parents, focus upon a concern for literacy and life opportunities for their children. Surveys like the one conducted by ASLIB consistently find support for free children's library services to be the strongest of all, among all groups of library users and non users (ASLIB 1995, p.170). Informants in ASLIB's qualitative database also consistently emphasise the educational role of the library

"Of the children I taught for 20 years, many of the poorest were the most able readers because the library gave them, through unlimited access to books at the optimum age, an inestimable advantage in every school subject as well as a lifelong pleasure" (ASLIB 1995, p.135)

Libraries are thus seen as providing "equity of access" to resources without which life chances would be seriously impaired. All in all, the library is still seen, first of all, in its traditional role of personal "enrichment" (Martin, 1998), to borrow a doubled edged phrase. It offers, for some, a way out of disadvantage - either socially and economically, or failing that, imaginatively, intellectually or psychologically.

Notwithstanding the public library's obvious functional connection with individualism (reading is, in the end, an *individual* experience) recent researchers have, nevertheless, attempted to demonstrate that libraries have a wider *social* or *community* role. The ASLIB *Public Library Review*, for example, emphasised the idea that public libraries should be "landmarks for communities" (p.22). Linley and Usherwood (1998) have piloted methodologies that will "audit" the social benefit of the public library as a whole, and Matarasso (1998) attempts to categorise the wide range of social benefits associated with libraries, especially where they operate in disadvantaged or excluded communities. In a specific study of the social potential of library projects, Matarasso develops a typology of such benefits comprising social cohesion; community empowerment; local image and identity; imagination and creativity; health and well being, as well as the "personal development" noted above. Moreover, there is some evidence provided in his study to show that opinion leaders - especially community leaders and representatives, elected members and professionals of various kinds - recognise these social and community roles to be valuable and legitimate.

Other evidence also shows that ordinary library users also value at least some of these roles, especially where library staff utilise resources actively rather than passively and make efforts to connect with the culture of client groups and communities. Both the ASLIB researchers and Linley and Usherwood draw attention, for example, to the popularity of the public library with elderly users because of its common function as a meeting place, venue for regular outings and stable community presence. Similar, and growing, recognition is also reported by Linley and Usherwood (p.40) of the support given by library services to community groups and organisations, and the increasingly common function of the library building as a community meeting place and networking centre. In a review of outreach initiatives in Scotland, Hasson (1996) points to significant further successes, especially where libraries have adapted their services to the subculture of working class, young and often unemployed users. Even by traditional measures of use, projects such as those in Ferguslie Park (Renfrew); Petersburn (Monklands); Whitehill (Hamilton) and Yoker (Glasgow) can be considered successful. All recorded high increases in both library membership and usage statistics: membership went as high as 67% in the working class district of Ferguslie (Hasson, 1996, p. 156-159). As Hasson makes clear, such success is largely due to a significant reconfiguration of the library's role involving outreach, partnership with communities and other agencies and overall a rebranding of the traditional library and its rules and its norms.

Nevertheless, there are limits to this perceived social role. Most of the examples cited by both Hasson and Matarasso relate to library projects which are exceptional and certainly not representative of “mainstream” public library services. This suggests that “social” and “community” functions are commonly classed in the library community as something peripheral to the individual and personal thrust of the core book lending and reference services which librarians commonly describe as “basic”. The exploratory, but nevertheless important, research by Harris (1998) seems to confirm this hypothesis. Harris set out to explore the perceptions of the public library held by “ordinary” users and non users in three “case study” locations, two of them at least in relatively deprived or excluded communities. Fundamentally, Harris found that public libraries “are not associated with social roles” (p.3) but by and large with “traditional” (I would add “individual/personal”) functions of book lending and reference for leisure and education. In focus group and individual interviews, Harris struggled to prompt informants to conceptualise alternative social functions for the public library, but largely failed to do so. He notes that “libraries are not perceived either by people in communities, or by many of their staff, to be associated with community regeneration or social inclusion” (p.13). He concludes from this that in order to develop legitimate social roles - especially those associated with combating social exclusion - libraries need to develop a sense of “community ownership, management, and accountability” (p.2). This includes, in particular, an increased willingness to explore the needs and perceptions of *non users* and to develop from these new community based service models.

3. Non-use and institutional exclusion

One initial way into an exploration of the perceptions of non users of library services is a re-examination of some of the positive claims and statistics about the public library reported above. Comedia (1993, p.9), for example, reviewed a range of surveys and estimated that only 33% of the population were active library users compared with the three-fifths figure given by ASLIB. Moreover, ASLIB's own figures for the use levels of libraries by people in lower socio-economic categories show "frequent" use by only 25%-26% of people in social class categories C2; D and E compared with 40% for classes AB and 30% for C1. Such tendencies are confirmed by the important *Breadline Britain* surveys reported by Bramley (1996) which look at the use of and attitudes to a range of public services by poor and disadvantaged people. Through use of multivariate analysis these surveys identify social class as the most important single determinant of public library use, respondents in Bramley's highest social class grouping being 1.4 times as likely to use libraries compared with those in the lowest. Interestingly, Bramley found that income *alone* was not a significant predictor of public library use patterns and also that library services were not especially more heavily used in high spending local authority areas. Thus, whilst he concludes that "demand led services in the leisure field open to a broad spectrum of the population tend to be used more by the better off or middle classes, and less by multiply deprived households" (p.211) he also adds that "the library service is highly developed and it may be that this is a case of a service approaching saturation level" (p.206).

What this suggests, of course, is that the library service as currently configured comprises a service model that effectively shuns perhaps a majority of working class and other disadvantaged people. Where these are documented, the comments of such "non users" of library services often reflect distance and alienation. In general terms, for example, the ASLIB researchers report that "non users predominantly suspect that public library users are mainly middle class and that the library has an unchanging image. Non users are unsure about the quality of services offered, about the value of council tax and about how up to date the library and its systems are" (ASLIB, 1995, p.144). Cultural barriers associated with the institution are particularly powerful for age groups like teenagers. Linley and Usherwood (1998, p.72) report the following comments from a young person in a detached youth project:

"it's a bit scary really... it always seems to be quiet and you feel terrible if you make a noise. There are lots of rules and regulations and quite honestly it turns me off"

In focus groups commissioned by York City Council (Marketing and Communications Group, 1996) non users particularly associate such barriers with problems with library staff. Informants report that "staff are welcoming to people they know really well, but I could walk in and was completely ignored" and that staff were "unsympathetic to children and a bit dismissive if it's not a very high class subject" (pp.36-38). In similar groups commissioned by the London Borough of Merton (MVA, 1998) some working class non users highlight the still powerful association of the library with books, silence and reading as a source of alienation:

"it's the word ain't it, like library - it's known as being a place where people just sit reading books doing nothing. It's the word ain't it" (MVA, 1998, p.2)

As the Merton report itself suggests, the very word “library” thus acts as a deterrent to many non users and as a symbol of a traditional, middle class alien culture. Other informants, however, immediately see through the tactic of a change of name

“ I think you're flogging a dead horse here, because people in this room don't really use a library and I don't think whatever you call it you're not gonna get us through the door. It's because we don't read the fact that we don't go really” (MVA, 1998, p.8)

For these non users, the gap between their own culture and that of the library is unbridgeable.

According to Roach and Morrison (1998), the institutional and cultural barriers common in public libraries are magnified for Britain's black and ethnic minority communities by the additional issues of race and ethnicity. In one case study in particular they highlight cultural distance and institutional racism as real problems and barriers to library use. One informant comments that “the exclusion of black people within society at large has probably impacted on their use of the library which is seen as another institution which is excluding them” and another suggests that “people don't identify with the library... the library does not share the community's identity” (pp.138-139). Roach and Morrison subsequently argue that libraries, as institutions, have a non welcoming or accessible environment for excluded users. They lack *cultural relevance* to the needs and interests of excluded groups and communities. As a result, they lack legitimacy in excluded group or community terms, resulting in non use and the perception of irrelevance. Whilst this analysis refers specifically to black and ethnic minority communities, it might nevertheless be applied more generally to a wide range of working class, communities and disadvantaged social groups. In Harris's research (1998, p.22) one library user unwittingly encapsulates this exclusion in reverse: “library users are like opera lovers - they're an elite group”.

Like opera, of course, the public library is not totally irrelevant to working class and disadvantaged groups and communities. Working class people historically have made enormous use of libraries for their own education, improvement and entertainment, and, as we have seen, they especially connect its services and values with the aspirations they hold for their children. However, the numerical evidence suggests that it is that minority of the working class who are socially, educationally or intellectually aspirational who particularly value and use public library services. As Comedia noted in a case study of a community library on a deprived estate, many of these may be people essential to the positive development of community life: carers, activists, volunteers and so on. The Comedia researchers concluded that “therefore, perhaps the greatest role the library plays in disadvantaged areas may not necessarily be through compensatory or welfarist activities, but in providing a friendly library with a good and varied bookstock to support the needs of the most strategically important people in the community” (Comedia, 1993, p.37)

Such a role is legitimate enough in itself, but would mark a major retreat from the aspirations of the library service to provide an equitable service for all. More specifically, it would in the end shun people who Matarasso (1998, p.56) describes as “the information denied... people who cannot read English; who have already been failed by the education system; whose lives are so

constrained by poverty as to make the question of reading, or even thinking beyond immediate problem solving, remote”. Just how library services can connect with the needs of these and other social groups is a complex and perennial problem, but one which needs to be seriously and consistently addressed. As Matarasso concludes “it must be time to look at a radical redevelopment of the library system which can ensure access to information, understanding and knowledge for all” (p.56). Perhaps this is what, in their own way, the voices of non-users and the excluded are trying to convey.

4. A role for research?

Many of the other working papers in this series, of course, suggest specific institutional modifications, service developments and outreach initiatives which might start to bring about fundamental change. It is perhaps important in the closing section of this paper, however, to point to the fact that the library related *needs* of many social classes and groups remain only dimly perceived. In the main, this is not due particularly to the lack of research *per se*: there are any number of theses and postgraduate dissertations, as well as market research studies which explore the “Information and Reading Needs of...” However, with few exceptions, most of these studies suffer from a tendency to conceptualise need in terms of demand for existing library services, and to focus on levels of satisfaction or otherwise with these. This tendency is replicated in general studies of the information needs of the general public, such as those of Beal (1979) and Baxter and Marcella (1998). The latter, recent survey focusing on “citizenship” information is interesting particularly because it concludes that “significant proportions (of UK citizens) feel poorly informed on topics central to their lives and are unaware that public libraries (despite their convenience) house materials which may satisfy such information need” (Baxter and Marcella, 1999, p.17). Harris (1998) found similar problems of conceptualisation even when using qualitative interviews. He reports that respondents had great difficulty in envisaging community and social roles for the library and “that it was noticeable on each of the field trips their concentration wavered and contributions faltered at this point” (Harris, 1998 p.10). All of this suggests how difficult it is to persuade often inarticulate respondents to conceptualise their needs in *anything other than the terms of existing library provision*. And yet, if the service is to be reformed, this is clearly a priority issue.

What is thus clear is the need for different kinds of research and communication strategy which will enable public libraries to develop innovative service models which are nevertheless linked to the interests and cultures of disadvantaged and excluded communities. A number of writers on local government have noted that in part this problem is an institutional and managerial one: writers like Matarasso and Harris echo this when they suggest with some legitimacy that only within a framework of the local and community management of libraries can real accountability and cultural change develop (Matarasso, p.57). However, such changes still fail to address the problem of potential users who articulate their own wants and needs with great difficulty. It is here that perhaps more basic, or generic, research has a role to play. In particular, that research which explores the “life world” of individuals, communities and social groups and relates it to information giving and seeking, learning, culture and recreation seems to provide a valuable model. Such research needs to be detailed and qualitative, probably utilising ethnographic methodologies which would enable an exploration in detail of the ways in which excluded communities and social groups both utilise information and are disadvantaged through the lack

of it. Examples of such research are thin on the ground, but in those examples that exist (for example Chatman, 1991; Savolainen, 1996) researchers have begun to document in detail the information channels utilised by disadvantaged people and how these are limited and constrained. If funded and supported sufficiently, similar research in the UK might begin to provide us with a detailed picture of the needs and cultures of our own disadvantaged social groups and communities. Such a picture would, of course, be the first step towards the development of new and more relevant service models of information and library provision.

One final action research strategy might also be suggested which is applicable at the local level: “needs auditing” or “community auditing” (Percy-Smith and Sanderson, 1992). This is an overarching research strategy which attempts to bring together the elements of several research and consultation methodologies at the local level. Elements of it are increasingly practised in local government in general but to the author's knowledge no library authority has independently attempted to undertake the whole process. In outline its elements comprise:

- conventional market research where users are seen as consumers of public services;
- more interactive consultation processes such as focus groups and consultative panels, which involve users, non users and service staff;
- both individual and community profiling and needs assessment;
- measurement and evaluation of effectiveness of services;
- input from politicians and other community representatives.

Percy-Smith and Sanderson (1992, p. 64) suggest that it marks an attempt to “integrate the codified knowledge of professionals with the experiential knowledge of ordinary people and to overcome the dichotomy between top down and bottom up approaches” to research. It initiates a cycle which begins with needs assessment, the redesign of services and their evaluation. It might thus, I would argue, provide an action research strategy particularly applicable to the design and evaluation of innovative models of public library service. This paper has suggested that excluded groups and communities both want and need such new services, even though they only dimly perceive what they might look like. It is thus the task of researcher, library managers and all library workers to work alongside them to bring such new models of service about.

5. Summary and conclusions

(i) This paper has highlighted a number of areas of dispute and disagreement about the relevance of public library services to disadvantaged and working class users. The dispute continues: effectively between those researchers who stress the value of public libraries to working class and disadvantaged communities and those who see them as mainly catering for the middle class.

(ii) I have suggested here that it is clearly the case that libraries are used and valued by a large number of working class people, but that these are a minority of the working class as a whole. Among those who do value them, their worth is largely conceptualised in terms of a) individual or personal development, which is often associated with educational and social mobility, and (b) also with “escape”, or a yearning for an exit route (often imaginative) to a wider world. These factors explain, for example, both the high popularity of children's libraries among working class parents who aspire to a wider world for their children and the continuing popularity among working class adults of fiction services.

(iii) Non users of public libraries consistently point to their *institutional culture* as a problem which leads to the effective exclusion of many working class and disadvantaged people. This problem is particularly apparent to black and ethnic minority non users, and also to particular groups such as teenagers. However, working class non-users generally often perceive the public library to have a middle class image.

(iv) New initiatives and projects which emphasis social and community roles are often appreciated and popular with people who have previously made little use of the public library. However, people are highly unlikely to *demand* these services - there is substantial evidence now that people have enormous difficulty in conceptualising library services in ways other than traditional book borrowing and reference.

(v) There is thus evidence that it will be necessary to both shift the institutional culture of the core library service *and* to innovate with newer, social roles if public libraries are to become relevant to working class and disadvantaged users. Research has an important part to play in this process, in particular as a way of identifying information and reading needs which disadvantaged people find it difficult to express or conceptualise themselves. Moreover, at the library authority level, there is clearly a case for initiating a number of action research projects which develop and evaluate new modes and models of service that aim to tackle social exclusion.

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