

Public libraries – a meeting place for immigrant women?

Abstract

The potential role of the public library in the lives of immigrant women is elicited by in depth interviews with nine female immigrants to Norway from Iran, Afghanistan and Kurdistan. Theoretically the research utilizes social capital theory, the concepts of communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation as well as the concepts of high intensive versus low intensive meeting places. The results indicate that the library that the library plays different roles in the different stages in the respondents' careers as immigrants. It opens up for legitimate peripheral participation where the immigrants move from observing at a distance to more active participation. The library functions as a high intensive as well as a low intensive meeting place and that it seems to contribute in building social capital in a variety of ways.

Introduction

Migration and the growth of a multicultural society is a major trend in today's globalized world. Many of the most important political challenges in western societies today are related to the issue of how to successfully integrate non-western immigrants, thus realizing the potential of globalization and multiculturalism and avoid threats such as ghettoization and an increased level of conflicts between ethnic groups (Putnam, 2007; Wood and Landry, 2008). The public library is an institution used by a large proportion of immigrants as well as by people belonging to the ethnic and cultural majority of the receiving country; it is an institution giving access to a broad specter of literary and cultural expressions from both minority and majority cultures, and a broad range of information that is useful when newcomers are trying to orient themselves in the new country. Libraries, then, seem to have a potential for helping society meet the challenges of multiculturalism and migration: They have a potential for providing immigrants with information they need to adapt to the new circumstances; they have potential for providing the immigrants with the opportunities of keeping in touch with their culture of origin; they have a potential for being a meeting place capable of creating communication and bridging between the minority cultures and the majority cultures.

This is a piece of research aiming at eliciting the role of the public library in the lives of immigrant women. The research, which is a part of the PLACE project,¹ is based upon qualitative interviews with nine female immigrants to Norway from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. The women were interviewed in their mother tongues, i.e. Farsi, Dari and

¹ PLACE – Public Libraries, Arenas for Citizenship – is a four year project (August 2007-April 2012) financed by the Norwegian Research Council, aiming at researching the public library's role as an arena fostering cross cultural communication and generating social capital in a multicultural society. The empirical material is based on a master thesis by Essmat Sophie written within the framework of the PLACE project.

Kurdish. One of the authors masters these three languages and the fact that the interviews could be undertaken in the mother tongues of the respondents contributed decisively to the project.

Problem statement

What role does the public library play in the lives of immigrant women and how do immigrant women perceive the role and potential of the library as a meeting place promoting integration and helping them handle problems they face in their new country? These are the overarching research questions to be addressed.

These overarching research questions will be elicited by linking observed library use to different spheres and different problem situations in the lives of immigrant women, for example:

Public libraries strive to reach out to immigrants by providing information about the new country in their mother tongue. What, if any, is the role of the library in immigrant women's efforts to adapt to the new country – learning the language, finding information about social and economic rights and obligations, educational problems, finding a job etc?

Social inclusion² and integration is related to the generation of trust and confidence between the newcomers and the majority population. The concept of social capital and the library's potential in generating social capital and trust is therefore central. What, if any, is the role of the library in creating communication between the immigrant women and the majority culture, thus promoting bridging social capital, versus the library as an arena where they can live out their role as members of an ethnic and cultural minority, thus promoting bonding social capital?

Inclusion and integration are processes that take place gradually. To study the potential of public libraries in promoting such gradual processes, the paper also investigates if and in which way the role of the library varies throughout the women's careers as immigrants. Can one, based on the findings, say anything about the library's roles in relation to different life spheres – education, work, leisure time, friendship, family life etc?

² Policies promoting social inclusion have become a focus area in European politics. Both the European Union as a whole and individual countries have developed policies related to the issue. Social inclusion can be defined as policies aiming at removing barriers to full participation in society such as poverty, lack of access to education, linguistic barriers etc, i.e. barriers leading to social exclusion (Sen, 2000).

Literature review

There is limited research on the role of public libraries in the lives of immigrants. Knowledge seems to be based more on summaries of practical experience and policy documents than on research. In the Scandinavian countries, national surveys are undertaken regularly to measure the citizens' use of public libraries. So far, ethnic background has not been an independent variable in these surveys. In some regional studies where ethnic background has been included as a variable, language represents a barrier. Developing questionnaires in the multitude of languages represented in the population is in most cases too expensive to be feasible. In the PLACE project, a survey has been undertaken where ethnicity is a variable. The respondents, however, had to master Norwegian. That is probably a major reason why immigrants are underrepresented in the sample (Aabø, Audunson & Vårheim, 2010). It is illustrative that in spite of the dominating role issues related to immigration and integration have in public debate in general and within public library policies in particular, none of the PhD-dissertations in LIS produced in the Scandinavian countries from the early 1990s to date have had immigrants and public libraries as a topic.

One does, however, find some scattered pieces of research. The project Public Libraries, Ethnic Diversity and Citizenship represents a major effort, including feedback from library staff, managers, library users and minority citizens – users of libraries as well as non-users (Roach & Morrison, 1999). The report concludes that public librarianship in the UK needs a thorough discussion on libraries and ethnic diversity and that it is necessary to take initiatives to improve relations between public libraries and minority groups, for example in the form of partnerships.

Caidi & Allard (2005) discuss in a Canadian context how libraries can promote the social inclusion of immigrants by helping them fulfill their information needs. They do not undertake empirical studies, but the article contains valuable and clarifying discussions of concepts such as different models of social inclusion, e.g. the weight put on social cohesion versus multiculturalism, and the relationship between social inclusion and information.

Fisher, Durrance & Hinton (2004) have undertaken an empirical study of the public library as a resource for immigrants in Queens Borough, New York City. Their basic concept is information grounds, which is somewhat related to the concept of low intensive meeting places used in this article (see below): it highlights meetings and information exchange as a side effect of the primary reason people have for the meeting and for visiting and being active on a given arena, for example the public library. Their conclusion, based on interviews with librarians and immigrants, is that the public library has the potential of being an important information ground for immigrants.

Johnson (2010) and Johnson & Griffis (2009) have undertaken two empirical projects studying the relationship between public library use and social capital; one in three communities in a Canadian city of approximately 350 000 inhabitants, the other in three communities in a US city with 600 000 inhabitants. The conclusion from both studies is that there is a relationship between library use and social capital, but the significant relationships are first and foremost between library use and community involvement, not so much between library use and trust. These two studies were undertaken in communities that differ markedly in demographic composition, for example the proportion of blacks versus whites and the degree of racial segregation, but immigrant background was not among the variables.

Japzon & Gong (2005) analyze the relationship between neighborhood characteristics and public library use where circulation is used as the measure of library use. Ethnic background is an important variable in this study, they find for example that library use measured as circulation is markedly lower among hispanics and blacks than among whites and people with an Asian background. Library use is positively correlated to the number of voluntary organizations in the neighborhood and negatively correlated to size of the service area and racial segregation. Given the high and often illegal immigration into the US from Latin America, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that there is a substantial proportion of immigrants in the material, but immigrant background was not among the variables.

A Danish study undertaken in the cities of Aarhus and Odense, indicates that whereas the percentage of borrowers among ethnic minorities equals the percentage of borrowers in the population at large, immigrants seem to use the library more intensively than the population in general and they use a broader specter of services (Berger, 2002). A quantitative observation undertaken during one week in the main libraries of the five largest Norwegian cities indicated that non-western immigrants are overrepresented among library users compared to their proportion in the population at large (ABM-utvikling, 2008). In this study, a significantly larger proportion of immigrants than users in general used the library for social purposes, coming to the library together. A similar observational study was undertaken in two branch libraries in Oslo in 2008. One was situated in a township with a high proportion of immigrants and one in a township with very low proportion of immigrants, 58 per cent of the observed users in the multicultural township had a non-western background whereas that is the case for 37 per cent of the inhabitants in that township in general (Høimyr, 2010). Both these observational studies indicate that immigrants to a higher degree than ethnic Norwegians use the library for other purposes than borrowing books. In particular they seem to take the library into use as a meeting place.

Within the framework of the PLACE project, a survey has been undertaken in three townships in Oslo, one suburb with a very high proportion of immigrants, one gentrified, inner city district and one typical middle class area. This study supports the hypothesis

that immigrants use the library more as a meeting place than the majority population. There are significant and positive correlations between having a non-western background and the numbers of meetings the respondents have experienced in the library, having experienced the library as a plaza (i.e. bumping accidentally into friends and neighbors, entering into conversation with strangers and reporting having been exposed to the complexity of the community and having learned about that complexity), performing joint activities with friends in the library and using the library's ICT-equipment for social purposes. (Aabø, Audunson & Vårheim, 2010).

A Swedish report concludes that the public library plays an important role in the integration process. In particular the local branches are important meeting places, and the librarian is often the first Swede the immigrants establish a relationship with. Library services, however, could be better adapted to the different and changing phases of the integration process, the report concludes. As it is, services are mainly adapted to those who have stayed in Sweden for a longer time (Svensk biblioteksforening, 2008).

Theoretical framework

Concepts such as social capital trust and categories of meetings and meeting places are central both in the problem statement of this research project and in much of the literature reviewed above. Below, the central theoretical concepts informing the research are presented.

Social capital

Social capital has come to the forefront in social science research over the last decade. According to Putnam (2000, p. 134) "the touchstone of social capital is the principle of generalized reciprocity". A community governed by such a principle, is a trusting community and in trusting communities transaction costs are lower than in communities characterized by a low level of trust. Putnam links social capital with face-to-face contact, i.e. voluntary participation in community organizations. Others link social capital to universal welfare arrangements (Rothstein & Kumlin, 2005). The logic behind the face to face approach is that regular and voluntary contact and cooperation with fellow citizens create trust. The logic behind the institutional approach is that universal welfare arrangements reduce suspicion that your fellow citizens unrightfully will try to persuade authorities into giving them access to scarce goods as well as reducing suspicion that authorities are open to such persuasion. The result is increased trust and reduced distrust in fellow citizens and authorities.

There are two kinds of social capital: The first is called bonding social capital and describes the bonds in closely knit groups – families, groups of friends, religious

congregations or, for that matter, a mafia group. The other kind of social capital is called bridging social capital and describes trust across these primary belongings.

Migration - in particular forced migration due to war, political oppression, natural catastrophes etc – implies a dramatic reduction in social capital. Migrants leaves family, friends and social networks behind and face the challenging task of building new networks with a capacity of building bonding social capital in the new country. If they are to be integrated in the new environments bridging social capital connecting them to the dominant culture is necessary. Building those bridges is no less challenge than establishing new networks with the capacity of building bonding social capital.

High intensive versus low intensive meeting places

Within the PLACE project the concept of high intensive versus low intensive meetings and meeting places has been developed (Audunson, 2005). High intensive meeting places are arenas where one lives out ones primary values and interests together with people who share those values and interests. Such meeting places have a high potential of generating bonding social capital. Low intensive meeting places are arenas where one is exposed to other values and interests than those cherished by oneself, for instance values and interests rooted in cultural belongings different from one's own culture. Such meeting places are needed to create bridging social capital. The public library might be an arena for high intensive meetings – friends might for example go there to plan a joint holiday in Paris or Rome – but being an institution used by all age groups, all social groups and all ethnic groups, it is probably also an important low intensive meeting place where one is exposed to otherness. How do immigrant women take the library into use as a meeting place: as a high intensive meeting place, as a low intensive meeting place or as both?

Wenger's concept of communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger, 1998) represents a third theoretical perspective. Legitimate peripheral participation describes the process whereby a newcomer becomes member of a community of practice. The learning necessary to become a full participant takes place through modified forms of participation, e.g. observation and peripheral tasks. Wenger's approach seems to be fruitful also when it comes to integrating immigrants in their new country and it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the local public library is an arena opening up for peripheral participation that gradually develops into full participation. Does the library play such a role in relation to immigrants?

Procedures

A qualitative design based on interviews was chosen for the study. The respondents all live in the cities of Tønsberg and Larvik, two neighboring cities in the county of Vestfold, Norway, approximately 100 km southwest of Oslo, the capital of Norway. Tønsberg has

approximately 39000 inhabitants whereas Larvik has 42000 inhabitants³. The proportion of immigrants is slightly below the national average, which, by the 1st of January 2009 was 11 per cent, with Oslo far ahead of the rest of the country with an immigrant population of 26 per cent.

The study comprises immigrants with an Afghan, Iranian and Kurdish background. The rationale behind selecting these nationalities can be summed up as follows: Immigrants with a non western background probably faces greater challenges related to integration compared to migrants coming from countries culturally closer to the receiving country. The selected groups represent an interesting and illustrating case in this respect. In addition, political conditions in the region have led to an influx of migrants with that background. The fact that one member of the research group masters the mother tongue of the respondents gave a potential for communication which would not have been there had other nationalities and language groups been chosen. The problem statement focuses upon the potential role of the public library in relation to different life spheres, roles and different stages in adapting to the new country. One criterion when recruiting respondents, therefore, was to have actual library users whose answers could say something about such questions.

Identifying respondents who fulfilled the criteria and who were willing to be interviewed turned out to be a challenging task. Probably due to cultural reasons, in particular Afghan women were skeptical.

Contacts with potential respondents were established via several channels: The organizations for adult education in the cities of Tønsberg and Larvik in addition to Tønsberg public library were contacted in order to identify possible respondents. The organizations for adult education are the main providers of language courses for immigrants. Via these organizations 32 women from Afghanistan were approached. Only four out of these defined themselves as library users, and three of these said no to being interviewed. Similar problems, although on a smaller scale, occurred with possible respondents with a Kurdish background. 23 were contacted; six of these defined themselves as library users and out of these four were willing to be interviewed. Among the Iranian women who were approached, a considerably higher proportion were library users and they were far less skeptical to being interviewed. Via contacts with teachers at a school with a high proportion of immigrant pupils and informal networks of immigrants, a pool of possible respondents which the researchers regarded to be sufficient was established. Out of this pool a group of nine respondents consisting of three from each of the nationalities, was selected.

The final sample was composed as follows.

³ The numbers of inhabitants in the two cities are taken from the official websites of the city councils. (<http://www.tonsberg.kommune.no/>, <http://www.larvik.kommune.no/>)

- Three of the respondents came from Iran and had Farsi as their mother tongue.
- Three came from Afghanistan and had Dari as mother tongue.
- Three came from Kurdistan and had Kurdish as mother tongue.
- Length of stay in Norway varied from 17 years till 8 months with an average of 9 years. These, however are extreme values. The length of stay among the rest was 2,5 years (1), 3 years (1), 6 years (1), 7 years (1), 8 years (2) and 10 years (1). In sum, the material is varied as far as length of stay in Norway is concerned.
- The most typical reason for migrating to Norway was family reunion. Six of the respondents came to Norway for this reason. The remaining three came as refugees.
- Age varied from 22 to 38. Six of the respondents were married (one with a Norwegian) whereas two were divorced and one was unmarried.
- Educational level was relatively high: One had two years from secondary school whereas the rest had two year or more of college or university education.
- Only one defined herself as unemployed whereas one other defined herself as homemaker. The remaining seven were employed, mostly in local government working for example as first language teachers, minority advisor, assisting teacher in a kindergarten or nursing assistant. Many combined two jobs.

A sample of nine respondents might seem small. When doing qualitative research there are, however, no fixed rules as to the number of respondents. As Kvale (2007) states, the number depends on the purpose of the study in addition to resources available. In some cases, for example if you want to understand a situation as it is experienced by a very limited group of people – how did for example president Obama and his closest staff experience the oil catastrophe in the Mexican gulf during the spring and summer of 2010 – only a very small sample is needed. Other cases presuppose a higher number of respondents. Kvale uses as an example a study aiming at exploring in detail the attitudes of boys and girls towards grades in school (Kvale, 2007). If the number of respondents is too high, however, it might be difficult to interpret the data qualitatively.

A key concept is saturation and the law of diminishing returns (Kvale, 1996). At a given stage, new interviews yield little new information. The present study is exploratory. It aims at identifying dimensions relating to the library's potential role in the lives of immigrant women. In such exploratory studies, the point of saturation is probably lower than in studies with other purposes. Although the number of respondents ideally could have been somewhat higher, it is sufficient given the exploratory nature of the study, i.e. identifying categories and dimensions that at a later stage can be tested on a larger sample, and given the difficulties in recruiting respondents satisfying the criteria.

The interviews were undertaken according to an interview guide. The guide was divided into seven sections. In the first section, the interviewer presented herself, explained the purpose of the interview and gave some practical information. The anonymity of the respondents was

guaranteed. In section two the respondents presented themselves and they were invited to reflect upon their life situation in Norway. Then, in section three, they were asked to describe their library use: How did they learn about the local public library, what services did they know of and which did they use. They were also asked to describe their library use in their home country. In section four the respondents were invited to reflect freely upon the role that the local public library plays in their lives. In section five, focus moved to the library's role as a meeting place: do they use the library together with others or do they come there alone? Have they taken part in organized meetings in the library? Have they made appointments to meet with friends, family or colleagues in the library and, if yes, what has been the context? Have they met with strangers in the library, to mention a few of the questions. Section six focused upon the library's role as an arena for integration, whereas section seven dealt with the library's role with regard to keeping in touch with one's culture of origin.

Questions on library use focused upon dimensions of usages. The respondents were not asked about frequency of use.

The interviews lasted from 50 minutes up to 90 minutes and were conducted in the respondents' mother tongue, tape recorded, transcribed and then translated into Norwegian. Kvale (2007, p. 103) states that when it comes to analyzing qualitative interview data "[...] no standard method exists, no *via regia*, to arrive at essential meanings and deeper implications of what is said in an interview". He distinguishes, however, between four basic modes of analyzing interviews: Analyses focusing on meaning, analyses focusing on language, bricolage and finally theoretical reading. Analyses focusing on meaning are further subdivided into meaning coding, meaning condensation and meaning interpretation. The analytical strategy used in the present study can be described as meaning interpretation combined with theoretical reading. When the respondents describe the role of the library in their lives, they are seldom explicitly relating it to categories such as life spheres and roles, low intensive versus high intensive meetings etc. The interviews have been read and reread in order identify underlying dimensions of use and relate usages to life sphere and roles.

Quotations cited in the text are selected due to their illustrative and exemplary value.

Findings

Perceptions of the library

The respondents come, with some variations, from countries where public libraries are far less developed than in Europe in general and the Scandinavian countries in particular. As expressed by one of the Kurdish respondents:

In our country the library often is an old building in the outskirts of the city or it is situated in the first floor of a private house. Librarians are grumpy people or they are people who cannot find jobs elsewhere or they are sent to the library as a punishment (sic!). (Samira from Kurdistan).

These experiences color their perceptions of libraries, which can be described as traditional or even antiquated: The library they know from their home countries are relatively inaccessible with closed stacks, no other media than (a few) books and a place where talking is strictly forbidden.

The respondents from Iran, however, deviate from this, having experienced libraries with open stacks and thus being exposed directly to the libraries' collections of books. The respondents from Iran had used libraries in their country of origin actively both for informational purposes and as a place for cultural activities.

The respondents report that when they first came to Norway and saw their local library, they found it an attractive place. However, their perception of library services is colored by the (lack of) library experiences from their home countries.

The experience of being an immigrant and library use: a place for consolation

The findings support the view that migration means an upheaval as far as social capital is concerned. One leaves an environment where one is integrated into stable social networks, where one knows the language and cultural codes and easily can communicate with others. That environment is replaced by one where everything is unknown, one has to build up social networks from scratch and one does not have the linguistic skills to communicate in the new country.

That travel was a veritable stroke to my soul and psyche. In Iraq people live in tighter social environments and I was surrounded by lots of friends and a large and socializing family. The travel to Norway made me lose everything. I came to a place where I knew no one except my husband. (Samira from Kurdistan)

Although all respondents expressed that they missed the families and the social lives of their home country, the degree of experienced loss varies with length of stay in Norway or whether they came together with family or not. Not surprisingly those who came to Norway together with family and relatives and those who have stayed here for a longer period of time experience their situation as migrants as less difficult than those who have been in the country for a shorter period and those who came alone or together with only their spouse.

Life in exile does not hurt me very much because I have my whole family beside me. (Ziba from Kurdistan)

The findings indicate that library use related to the reported feeling of being a newcomer to a foreign culture is one important dimension of the library's role in the lives of immigrant women. The library is used to cope with a difficult life situation characterized by emotional stress, isolation and loneliness:

Sometimes it feels like everything is dark and quiet. Then I come to the library and see people sitting there talking together. That gives me a good feeling. (Sima from Afghanistan)

I used to live in another city before moving here and I had almost no acquaintances or friends there. It was very sad. The library was the only place that could fill my empty days. (Mina from Afghanistan)

The library is described as a friend: "...the library was my best buddy, particularly in the first difficult period when I was completely new in Norway". (Samira from Kurdistan). The library is also described as a haven where they, in a difficult life situation, can find consolation and live out their sorrow and despair together with friends without being seen by others, in particular fellow countrymen.

Sometimes we talked about very private things or about our longing and difficulties. It happened that we cried together and opened our hearts to each other. When you cry it is a sign of hopelessness and helplessness and we did not want other countrymen to see us in such situations. Therefore we used the library for talking about things of personal importance to us. (Samira from Kurdistan)

Some of the respondents report that they go to the librarian with highly intimate and personal questions, for example showing the librarian their medical journal in connection with questions related to health, which indicates a very high degree of trust in the librarian as a public employee.

The findings indicate, however, that using the library to cope with emotional distress and frustrations is important first and foremost in the early stages of being an immigrant. It is first and foremost then they go to the library with their inner needs related to homesickness, feeling alone etc. The library is also related to their role as mothers and as an arena where they can live out their needs for social contact. Above, Mina from Afghanistan has been quoted saying that when she lived in a community where she had no friends and acquaintances, the library filled her empty days. She goes on, however, saying "after moving to Tønsberg, I have had no time to visit the library. I have got more friends and use my time differently".

Also Ziba from Kurdistan expresses the same when saying that "...before I needed the library and had more time to use it. Now I feel that I have less need for it and also less time and opportunity to use it". This respondent reports that her library use has changed. After having become relatively firmly established in the new country, she does not use the library so much for private purposes. Instead she uses it professionally. She is employed by the local government as an immigration consultant.

The library as an arena for integration: learning about the new country

Practically all the respondents report that the library played a vital role in their efforts to master the Norwegian language after arriving to Norway. The children's department was particularly important. All the three respondents from Iran, for example, reported that they started with borrowing and reading children's books. After their linguistic skills developed, they moved to more advanced literature for adults.

Several of the respondents also report that they use the library as an arena to prepare themselves to take part in Norwegian activities of a more ceremonial nature, e.g. to learn how Norwegian children celebrate birthdays when their sons or daughters are invited to a birthday party, to learn about wedding customs or how Norwegian holidays are celebrated.

The respondents who report having used the library to learn about birthday or wedding traditions used books to cover their information needs.

One day one of my children was invited to a birthday party. I did not know how a birthday party is arranged in Norway. Therefore I went to the library and found an easy to read book on the topic. (Negar from Afghanistan)

Or:

I should marry my present Norwegian husband. I was eager to find a book about wedding traditions. I went to the library and the librarian guided me to the right book shelf. (Hana from Iran)

But some of the respondents report that they learn about life, customs and habits in Norway just by sitting in the library observing. Through that they learn something about rules and norms regulating social behavior.

Those with more advanced skills in the Norwegian language report that through reading books they borrow in the library, they learn about the Norwegian society, whereas others rely more on observation. Tara from Iran and Negar from Afghanistan who both have lived in Norway for seven years and have 3 children each, report that they first and foremost use the library together with their children and that by observing the children taking part in activities in the library, activities that often are related to upcoming holidays, they learn something of the culture in their new country. Another respondent took part in a homework group and got acquainted with some of the teachers working voluntarily there. She still has contact with them, now on a private basis.

One interesting finding is that reading about Norway, seems to have a potential of creating bridges between the immigrants' culture, history and experiences from their country of origin and the new country. Samira from Kurdistan (Iraq) puts it this way:

When I came here, I thought the inhabitants in this country had everything. I thought people lived in wealth and well being and never had experienced poverty, war, economic sanctions and

occupation...But this feeling between myself and this people vanished when I read a book about Norwegian history or a novel or a short story throwing light on other dimensions with the Norwegian society. Knowledge about such issues creates internal connections and continuity between myself and the Norwegian people. (Samira from Kurdistan)

The library as a meeting place

Librarians have observed that women and girls whose freedom of movement in public space is relatively restricted, e.g. some groups of Moslem immigrants, are allowed to use the library. It is regarded a safe and acceptable place to visit (Ulvik, 1997). The findings in this study seem to confirm that. Practically all the respondents maintain that the library is a safe place where they can perform a variety of activities alone or in the company with others. Negar from Afghanistan says that due to her having a conservative husband, visiting other public places such as cafes or cinemas is difficult. Using the public library, however, does not create family conflicts. The same respondent maintain that visiting the library together with her children for her is like going to a picnic in a country where sitting out in the parks is too cold the greater part of the year.

We [i.e. the respondent and her children] could stay there for hours and occupy ourselves with different activities. In the children's department there were toys that my children played with. There were some PCs there which they also used. When they got hungry, we went to the small café in the library. (Negar from Afghanistan)

Many of the respondents report that they have established contact with and got acquainted with strangers in the library, fellow countrymen as well as Norwegians. Sima from Iran reports that "... once a man passed me and asked me if I am an Iranian, maybe he could see from my looks that I come from Iran". Or:

A while ago I became aware of a man who looked a lot at me. The next time he saw me, was by the journal shelves. I was busy reading an Arabic journal. He approached me and asked if I was an Arab. I answered no, but said that I know Arabic. We talked a little together. I still see him from time to time in the library, and sometimes we talk. (Samira from Kurdistan)

The respondents tend to have low trust in their fellow countrymen and Samira who is quoted above also said that one of the reasons for meeting with her friends in the library is that there they feel protected from the eyes of their countrymen. In spite of skepticism to their fellow immigrants, the respondents report meetings and getting acquainted with other immigrants in the library. Ziba, also from Kurdistan, got acquainted with a countryman while sitting at the table in the newspaper corner. He had recently arrived in Norway and asked her about rules and regulations here. During their conversation Ziba received news from her home country. Others report bumping accidentally into countrymen in the library.

Respondents also report meetings with Norwegians whom they did not know previously. Some have been approached by Norwegians due to their appearance. Tara from Iran, for example, says that after a cultural event at school, she went to the library dressed in a national costume. Many library patrons got curious, approached her and asked where the costume came from. The same respondent also said that she frequently enters into conversations with elderly Norwegian men in the library. They are friendly and accommodating, she says. She often visits the library to read newspapers and then she frequently enters into talks with those (i.e. elderly men) sitting there. Once at school she had been given the assignment of analyzing a poem. She asked one of these elderly men for help and he helped her. They still greet each other when they meet in the street or in the library, she says. Others have similar stories, for example one respondent who reports having entered into an interesting discussion over a movie which both she and a Norwegian man, again one of the elderly kind, wanted to borrow.

Taking part in organized activities is another channel for meeting with Norwegians and then with Norwegians not belonging to the category of elder men. One reports that when visiting the health station with her baby she was informed that the library had a mother and child group, and she started attending it. Through that activity she established contact with Norwegian mothers, although, she reported, some of the Norwegian mothers were not very interested in talking with her.

The library as a bridge to the culture of the home country

Norwegian public libraries give priority to developing collections in the languages of the different groups of immigrants. The respondents seem to value that service, even though not everyone makes use of it. A Kurdish respondent says that the librarian has informed her about books and newspapers in her language but says that she personally has not felt any need to use the service. In spite of not using it she says that she values it and feels that Norwegians express respect for her culture by developing such a service. This indicates that in addition to being a useful service, the bare existence of it develops trust and confidence by signaling that Norway accepts their culture and traditions.

There are some Kurdish books and newspapers there and the librarian has even informed me about this service, but I have never used the service myself. I have never felt a need for it. But I am happy that the library has this service. I feel that Norwegians appreciate my culture by offering this service. (Tania from Kurdistan)

The majority of the respondents, however, use the service. The usage seems to cover the different needs:

1) Movies and literature from their home country are used to soften homesickness. They report for example borrowing tourist videos, reading travel literature or looking at a map of their home country. And even though they might have read most of the books the library can offer in their mother tongue, reading them again build bridges to their culture of origin.

2) They use the service in order to cover their need for news from their home country. Newspapers and journals seem to play a more important role for the respondents than the Internet. Only two report using Internet at the library to keep in touch with their home country.

3) Those having children use the library to introduce their children to the literature, language and culture of their home country.

One surprising finding is that some of the respondents report having learned things about their home country. Hana from Iran reports that through the library she has learned things about the country she comes from that she did not know while living there. “The library has made me know my cultural heritage better.” Videos have made her acquainted with places she never had the opportunity to visit when she lived in the country. Respondents from Afghanistan report the same, for instance through reading *The Bookseller of Kabul* by Åsne Seierstad.

Discussion

Returning to the initial research questions, the findings of this study indicate that library use is related to a variety of life spheres. Women interact with libraries as friends, mothers, education seekers, students of the language of their new country, information seekers, members of their culture of origin etc. The public library seems, however, to play different roles in the different phases of the respondents’ careers as immigrants. In the initial stages its role as an arena that reduces loneliness and homesickness is particularly important, whereas its instrumental role seems to come more to the forefront in later stages. When describing the role of the library in the first period after coming to Norway, terms like “my best friend” and “buddy” were used – terms that indicate a high level of trust in the library as an institution. The conclusion, made in a report issued by the Swedish Library Association (Svensk biblioteksförening, 2008), that the library is best suited to meeting the needs of the immigrants who have lived in their new country for a relatively long time, is not supported. Many of the respondents report that it was in the first period after their arrival in Norway that the library was particularly important. Later, when they had become increasingly integrated, they did not need the library as much.

The findings of this study indicate that the library contributes in generating social capital and promoting inclusion. This happens in several ways. Firstly, migrants establish contacts with people from the majority population in the library. Contacts are established spontaneously, for example in the newspaper corner or by the video shelves, or through taking part in organized activities such as home work groups or mother and child groups. If immigrant women who participate in such meetings expose their difference, for example by using a national dress, that might generate curious questions from and communication with Norwegian participants at the meeting in question. Through such meetings, in spontaneous and organized settings, an environment for creating bridging social capital is created. The findings also indicate that the library as a local government institution contributes in creating trust in the Norwegian society.

And although the respondents tend to express low trust in their fellow countrymen, it is also an arena for socializing and bonding with (female) friends from the same country.

When it comes to trust and social capital, the respondents' descriptions of their situation in Norway compared to life in their country of origin, are both interesting and paradoxical. The environments they have left behind were generally characterized as tight social networks, i.e. a high amount of bonding social capital. Trust in government, and political and administrative institutions, however, is generally low in their countries of origin. It is reasonable to hypothesize that it is particularly low among people who, like the respondents of this study, have chosen to leave their country and in some instances even have been forced to flee for political and social reasons. In Norway, however, trust in fellow countrymen (or countrywomen) is low. They tend to describe them as being unsupportive, gossiping and talking behind their backs. This seems to be particularly valid for those living alone. They experience, as a result of this, difficulties in bonding with their countrymen. On the other side, they express a high degree of trust in the Norwegian society and Norwegian institutions to the degree that they reveal highly intimate information, for example information from medical journals, to the librarian. They also express satisfaction with universal social rights and with being respected as humans and women. That seems to be related to the universal rights that the Norwegian welfare society endows upon its inhabitants. Universal rights, information about those rights so that they can claim them and predictability seem to be important in this respect. The institutional perspective on social capital seems to be supported: Universal rights foster trust and confidence.

One research question is related to the library as an arena for expressing the women's role as members of an ethnic and cultural community. The library's role in this respect seems to be limited as far as activities with people belonging to the same cultural community is concerned. When the respondents report meetings with other than family members, they usually refer to one close and intimate friend. They come to comfort each other, not to build community with people with the same cultural background, but on the contrary to avoid them. As stated above, trust between immigrants tend to be low. One reason given for meeting with friends in the library was that there they feel protected from and can hide from the scrutiny of their fellow countrymen. In spite of that, however, the respondents do report spontaneous meetings and communication with other immigrants from the same region, for example in the newspaper corner. These meetings seem, however, to be of a low intensive nature.

One aspect of the library's role as a bridge to the country and culture of origin is the provision of services – books, newspapers and movies – in the immigrants own languages. The primary reason for including such documents is, from the library's side, to provide the immigrants with opportunities to stay in touch with their culture of origin. The findings indicate that these services are used for the intended purpose. But in addition to the use value, an important side effect of such services might be that it is seen as an expression of recognition of minority cultures by the Norwegian society, thereby fostering trust and bridging social capital and giving a feeling of inclusion. Although explicitly pointed out by only one respondent, this might be an important dimension of the library's role in line with the main idea in Taylor's

seminal paper on the politics of recognition (Taylor, 1994). Caidi & Allard (2005, p. 320) make the same point when stating that “The inclusion of archival material of marginalized and vulnerable communities and other groups such as immigrants enables the creation of a public shared history that contributes to feelings of inclusion within a culture as well as promoting social legitimacy by way of tangible documentary records”. Future research on this dimension of the public library’s role is of interest.

The concept of high intensive versus low intensive meeting places seems fruitful in understanding the role of the library as a meeting place for immigrant women. The library functions both as a high intensive and a low intensive meeting place. The spontaneous and informal meetings reported in the newspaper corner, the equally spontaneous conversations about movies in front of the video shelves between an immigrant woman and a Norwegian man, as well as the woman who reported having been approached by curious Norwegians when she wore a national costume, are all examples of low intensive meetings where participants make a part of their culture visible to each other. Taking part in organized activities such as a mother and child group represents meetings combining a high intensive and a low intensive dimension. One involves oneself in such groups due to a fundamental engagement, for example being a parent or pursuing an educational project together with others sharing the same engagement. At the same time one is exposed to people that are ethnically and culturally different from oneself and bridges can be built. Meetings with friends are of a purely high intensive nature.

The library seems to play an important part in the process of integration, particularly when it comes to learning the language of the new country and identifying rights and duties in the new country.

The concept of legitimate peripheral participation seems fruitful when it comes to understanding the role of the library in the different stages of the inclusion process. The library stands forth as an arena that allows for legitimate peripheral participation, where the immigrants start by learning about social life, customs and habits in the new country from a distance, by observing and reading, and then gradually become involved as more active participants in the library’s organized activities. The library supports movement from this position of observation from the outside to active involvement, for example when some mothers report having participated together with their children in organized activities in the library, e.g. Halloween activities. Participating in such activities implies learning about social life in Norway through activity, and the move from observing to participating simultaneously illustrates the library’s role as a low intensive as well as a high intensive meeting place; the library allows for movement between different roles, for example that of an observer and that of a participant. Its role in learning the Norwegian language, where several respondents report that they started out reading children’s books and then, as their language skills improved, moved to books for adults, can be seen as an expression of the library as an arena for stepwise learning and integration and, thus, as an arena for legitimate peripheral participation.

The study has identified some important dimensions of the library's potential role in the lives of immigrant women. Future research of both a quantitative and a qualitative nature is needed to test the relative importance of the dimensions identified and to achieve a more profound understanding of how the library is used as a meeting place by immigrants in general and immigrant women in particular. It is also necessary to undertake research in communities where immigrants make up a more substantial proportion of the population than in the communities on which the present study is based. In the next stage of the PLACE-project studies will be carried out to achieve this goal.

Conclusion

For immigrant women the public library stands forth as a complex meeting place, supporting their integration in a variety of ways and with relevance in a variety of life spheres: It offers bridges to the culture of the new country as well as bridges to their culture of origin. It seems to offer an arena where they can move smoothly and seamlessly from observing the culture of the receiving country from a distance to active participation; it is an arena for comfort and consolation in a difficult life situation as well as an arena for activity and participation and it is related to different spheres of life, from the private sphere of friendship and family to education and employment. The respondents report uses that are instrumental and linked to *the system world* of work, education, bureaucracy and formal information as well as uses linked to *the life world* of meaning, culture and individuality.

The role of the library in the lives of immigrant women appears to develop throughout their careers as immigrant. In the early stages its role as a place for consolation and comfort is important whereas its instrumental role seems to increase when they are more established in the new country.

The library seems to have a potential as an arena for legitimate peripheral participation, opening up for a gradual and stepwise process of participation and integration.

The concepts of high intensive versus low intensive meeting places seems to be fruitful in analyzing libraries' role and they appear to have a capacity of building trust and bridging social capital. Contacts and communication between the immigrants and representatives from the majority population are reported and the respondents express a high degree of trust in the library as a public institution and the librarian as a public employee.

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