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**Public libraries, social capital, and low intensive  
meeting places**

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**Abstract**

**Introduction.** This paper presents a research project aiming at eliciting the potential of public libraries in building social capital, and promoting generalized trust in today's multicultural society.

**Method.** Two approaches to research, the societal approach and the institutional approach are identified. The concept of low intensive versus high intensive meeting places is presented. A survey among inhabitants in four different metropolitan communities varying according to demographic characteristics in general, and the percentage of the population with a non-Western background in particular was undertaken. Initial results from a survey on how the public library is taken into use as a meeting place are presented and analysed.

**Analysis.** Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the research question.

**Results.** The survey results indicate that the library is a complex meeting place with a range of meetings along a continuum from high intensive to low intensive meetings.

**Conclusions.** The library's potential role as a promoter of social capital by functioning as a low intensive meeting place seems to offer a promising research agenda.

## Introduction

In this article we will discuss how the public library is used as a public space and a meeting place, and how the library's importance as a meeting place is perceived and evaluated. The goals of the paper are i) to present the concept of social capital and discuss its fruitfulness in relation to research on the role of public libraries, ii) to present an elaboration of the social capital-approach that has been developed within the framework of this project, low intensive versus high intensive meeting places and iii) to present some preliminary results from an initial survey and their implications for the fruitfulness of low intensive meeting places in social capital generation.

## Social capital and the public library

Social capital has been ascribed with positive effects for community development, schooling, democracy, government efficiency, economic development, individual health and well-being, and for combating drug abuse, crime, and unwanted teenage pregnancies ([Granovetter, 1985](#); [Hutchinson and Vidal, 2004](#); [Putnam, 1993](#); [2000](#); [2004](#); [Wakefield and Poland, 2005](#)). A widely accepted definition of social capital is that it involves social networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity ([Putnam, 1993](#)). The research on social capital has been mainly conducted from two different theoretical perspectives, one society-centred approach and one institution-centred approach ([Vårheim, 2007](#)).

### The societal creation of social capital

Voluntary associations and face-to-face interaction are the main producers of social capital within the societal approach ([Putnam, 1993](#); [Putnam, 2000](#)). The causal mechanism professed is that regular social interaction creating social capital is generated by participation in voluntary associations or by informal interaction, e.g., within neighbourhoods and with friends.

Evidence for the effect of voluntary association membership on social capital is unclear ([Stolle and Hooghe, 2003](#)). Effects of participation in voluntary associations on social capital mostly come from self-selection. Members of voluntary associations are the ones that are trusting in the first place. However, voluntary associations remain important in interest aggregation, in connecting citizens with government, and their work is important in local communities.

The small contribution of voluntary associations to the generation of social capital implies that it is informal interaction that seems most interesting for research. The workplace, neighbourhoods, communities, and dinner parties are potential routes to civic attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore, the family as a creator of social capital has not been much studied ([Stolle, 2003](#)). The social experiences of parents and their role as primary educators can be expected to be a profound influence on the patterns of social trust among children.

### The institutional creation of social capital

The institutional approach to the generation of social capital argues that social capital is increased in a working democracy, by efficient political institutions and public policies ([Rothstein and Stolle, 2003](#); [Stolle, 2003](#)). Universal social programs (e.g., in education and health) apply to the whole population and create a more equal allocation of resources and opportunities ([Korpi and Palme, 1998](#); [Rothstein, 1998](#); [Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005](#)).

In reducing inequality, universal policies generate social trust. Because of this, universal programs giving the same to all classes are more redistributive than selective policies involving means-tested social services ([Korpi and Palme, 1998](#); [Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005](#); [Swank, 2002](#)). Political parties endorsing high taxes and selective policies estrange the middle class from government and its policies because the middle class want services in return for high taxes. Further, universal programs make administrative units needed for determining eligibility in selective systems, superfluous. Universal programs avoid some of the emotions of unworthiness, hostility, social stigma, and spirals of distrust among welfare recipients created by "special treatment" and enhanced through contact with street level bureaucrats. Universal policies create social capital by being expressions of procedural justice ([Kumlin and Rothstein, 2005](#)).

## **The difficulty of explaining social capital creation**

Both the societal and the institutional approach have run into difficulties in the attempt to explain how social capital is created ([Stolle, Soroka and Johnston 2005](#)). The society-centred approach has focused upon voluntary associations and face-to face relations as the generators of social capital. One problem for the societal perspective is that the people joining voluntary associations are high trusters in beforehand. Informal interaction between people seems a promising route or at least needs more research to conclude about its contribution to social capital generation.

On the other hand, the institutional perspective sees institutions and public policies as the generators of social capital. Neither institutional explanations have been able to demonstrate clearly the micro-mechanisms that create generalized trust. Maybe it is the case that societies with high trusters create universal institutions and not the other way around ([Vårheim, Steinmo and Ide, 2007](#)). This impasse has moved social capital research in the direction of research questions focusing on diversity. If the concept of social capital is useful, at all, social capital must be generated as bridging social capital, e.g. bridges between races or ethnic groups have to be built, i.e. generalized trust generated through establishing weak ties between people. Most studies find that diversity drives down trust ([Costa and Kahn, 2003](#); [Alesina and La Ferrara, 2002](#); [Alesina and La Ferrara, 2000](#); [Delhey and Newton, 2005](#); [Coffe and Geys, 2006](#)). However, there are a few studies that point to multiethnic settings where generalized trust can be created.

A study by Marchall and Stolle found that interaction between races did not influence generalized trust neither positively nor negatively ([2005](#)). On the other hand, informal contact between white neighbours increased trust. However, Uslaner ([2006](#)) finds that the most important factor decreasing trust is inequality. Generalized trust is low when neighbourhoods are segregated (often the result of inequality), not when they are diverse. Segregation means small opportunities for contact between groups. Majority groups feel threatened by unknown ethnic minorities. Thus, in-group trust or particularized trust is strengthened. As opposed to segregated neighbourhoods, diverse neighbourhoods enjoying frequent contact between groups mixed with relative equality can enhance trust.

## **How to create generalized trust?**

From an institutional perspective the question of trust generation boils down to the importance of establishing institutions and universal programs to create equality as a precondition for trust. Considering the difficulties of expanding welfare states and programs in most places, even in the Nordic countries, this might seem a solution for the distant future. However, public libraries are universal programs, if not globally, at least in the western world. And this universal status is independent of whether welfare state institutions in general are developed in the respective countries ([Vårheim, Steinmo and Ide, 2007](#)). Public libraries offer their standardized services to everybody whether localized in Texas or in Sweden. Within the sparse research on the public library and social capital there is some evidence that the public library by being a universal institution can create social capital, but even less little research has been conducted from a society-centred perspective. ([Vårheim, forthcoming](#); [Vårheim, 2007](#)). In being a universalistic institution in principle open to everybody, and thereby more open than most other

universalistic institutions, the public library is one candidate for having an institutional setting fulfilling some of the strict conditions specified in social psychological research for contact between people that creates trust. For contact to increase trust it must happen in a context of "equal group status within the situation, common goals; inter-group cooperation; and the support of authorities, law, or custom" (Pettigrew, 1998:65 (as cited in [Vårheim, Steinmo and Ide, 2007](#))). Additionally, the understanding of public libraries as low-intensive meeting places ([Audunson, 2005](#)), makes it possible to see the library as an arena for informal social interaction, for the creation of weak ties, generalized trust and bridging social capital. The unique universalistic and open status of the public library should make it extraordinarily well suited for bridge building across diversities ([Vårheim, Steinmo and Ide, 2007](#)). Thus, studies of social capital formation in public libraries may contribute in dissolving the present deadlock in social capital research. The public library is a very good case for investigating social capital creation both from a societal and an institutional perspective, and for studying informal interaction within an institutional framework. At the same time these studies will add to the knowledge of the library institution.

## **Low intensive versus high intensive meeting places and the challenges of the multicultural and digital society**

Above we have used the term low intensive meeting places. The dichotomy of high intensive versus low intensive meeting places was developed in Audunson ([2005](#)). It is related to bonding versus bridging social capital, particularized trust vs. generalized trust. High intensive meeting places are defined as arenas where we live out our primary involvements and values. For those dedicated to career and profession, it might be the workplace and professional organizations. For others it might be a religious congregation, a political party, the fan club of their favourite football team, a rock'n roll club etc. High intensive meeting places are probably vital in constituting people's identity and providing their lives with meaning and bonding social capital through contact with similar people. Low intensive meeting places are meeting places where people are exposed to values and interests different from those that create their core identities by having contact with diverse people. They may be important in creating bridges between people with different values and belonging to different cultures

Today's multicultural and digital society faces new possibilities as well as new challenges in relation to generating bridging social capital. Multiculturalism holds the promise of stimulating contacts across cultural boundaries. The essence of the digitally based information society is, according to Qvortrup ([1998](#)), that it exponentially increases the number of people we can be in society with, i.e., it increases society. But, on the other hand, multiculturalism might lead to ghettoization; instead of more society, digitization might lead to individualization and fragmentation. In the post modern society people have the capability of constructing their lives. Particularly in large cities people can choose work, areas where to live, cafes and web-sites etc., where they meet people similar to themselves in age, education, ethnicity, and fundamental values. If there is a radio station only playing the kind of music you prefer without mixing it with other genres, why shouldn't you choose that station? But then, of course, you are not exposed to and led to accept other musical genres, and may even be stimulated by these. The complexity and fragmentation in post modern society, result in a situation where arenas capable of generating bridging social capital do not appear by themselves. Conscious policies are probably necessary for creating these arenas. One question is whether public libraries constitute an arena for the implementation of such policies.

## **Generalized trust and low intensive meetings in the library**

Several case studies point out that public libraries have a potential for generating generalized trust and bridging social capital. The establishment of a new public library in a deprived and run down part of Chicago increased the inhabitants trust (or decreased their distrust) in the city's willingness to do something for them. Since the library in question is located on the border between a deprived part of the

city and a well to do-part, it also opens up a potential for building bridging social capital between different social groups. ([Putnam, Feldstein and Cohen, 2003](#)). A study of Seattle Public Library as place concludes that "SLP serves as a connector, providing social opportunities for people to interact across the generations". ([Fisher, Saxon, Edwards and Mai, 2006](#), p.145). Many of the respondents in this study answered that the new public library increased their pride in the city, something which also might be regarded as promoting trust in the city as a polity and institution. Semi-structured user interview data from the new Tromsø Public Library, Norway, collected in the June 2006, clearly supports this. Audunson ([2005](#)) refers to a situation in a public library branch in a wealthy part of Oslo, Norway. A group of senior citizens was involved in an Internet group for seniors. The library was also, due to being better equipped with ICT than most other branch libraries in Oslo at the time, frequented by a group of youngsters from a low status suburb. In the beginning, the middle class senior citizens and the suburban youngsters were competing over the same scarce resource. Gradually, however, contact and cooperation developed and the young people ended up being informal teachers and mentors for the seniors in surfing the web. Our research aims at investigating the potential indicated by examples such as these.

## **The initial survey**

In the spring of 2006 an initial survey was undertaken. The aim of this study was to: a) estimate the level of social capital by measuring people's degree of trust in some important institutions in the community and people' participation in social activities in the community and their involvement in initiatives to influence political administrative authorities; b) their use of the local public library as a meeting place and c) the views as to what initiatives the library ought to give priority to in order to promote social capital and participation in the community.

The survey was undertaken in three communities of Oslo: One we refer to as the multicultural community, one we refer to as the gentrified community, and one which we term the middle class community. In addition, the capital of Northern Norway - Tromsø - was included in the survey. The rationale behind the selection of cases was to have cases that vary along the dimensions of multi-ethnicity, social heterogeneity, and historical development. In this paper we focus upon the three Oslo communities.

## **Characteristics of the communities**

The community named the "multicultural community" is a suburban area developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The number of inhabitants is approximately 33000, out of which more than one third are immigrants with a non-western background. Also age distribution differs significantly from city average, being lower than in Oslo as a whole. 34 percent of the inhabitants are below 20 years old compared to 22 percent in the city as a whole. It was the latest large suburb constructed in Oslo. Average level of income and education are lower than city average. The multicultural community is a large community consisting of several smaller communities. For the inhabitants in some of these entities, access to the local library by public transportation is difficult.

The second community, which we term the "middle class community", is also a suburban community. It has a population of approximately 22000 inhabitants, but with opposite characteristics compared to the multicultural community: A traditional middle class area with few immigrants - not more than approximately five percent of non-western background - and a higher level of income and education than city average. The percentage of inhabitants below 20 years old is marginally higher than city average, 25 percent compared to 22.

The third community - the "gentrified community" - is an inner city district historically organised around some of the major industrial factories in Oslo, and with strong working class traditions that still are prevalent among older inhabitants. It is an area that has most of the inner city characteristics summarized by Gans ([1995](#)): i.e., an inner city area populated by different groups that on the surface have little in

common, e.g., the cosmopolitans (university teachers, artists etc.), the young, unmarried and childless, the ethnic villagers, i.e., the immigrants from Africa and Asia, and the left behinds from the industrial era. At the same time as it is being gentrified with many middle-class people moving in, this community has a higher proportion of social clients than city average. It also has a relatively high proportion of immigrants, although substantially less than the multicultural community. In the primary schools, however, more than 50 percent of the pupils have a non-Western background. The age distribution is peculiar. The proportion under 20 is very low; 13 percent compared to the city average of 22. The concentration of inhabitants between 20 and 39 years of age is very high, 51 percent compared to the city average of 35.6, while the middle class community has only 15 percent in this age group.

## **The sample**

250 persons from each of the participating communities over the age of 18, i.e., 750 from Oslo, were drawn randomly from the telephone directory. 30 percent of these were drawn from the cell phone directory in order to prevent young people and people seldom at home from being under represented. The language used was Norwegian, a fact that probably has contributed to the under representation of immigrants in the sample. In the multicultural community, where almost 1/3 of the inhabitants have a non-western background, only 18 percent of the respondents in our sample have such a background.

The sample clearly reflects some of the differences between the communities presented above, e.g. the age-distribution and level of education. In our sample 54 percent in the gentrified community are between 18 and 39 years old compared to 34 per cent in the multicultural community and 27 percent in the middle class community. In the gentrified community and the middle class community 53 and 51 percent respectively have university or college education at bachelor level or above. That is the case for 30 percent in the multicultural community.

## **The variables in the survey**

In the survey we tried to measure the following variables:

1. Social capital: The variable of social capital was measured by three groups of questions:
  - The degree to which the respondents take part in different activities in their community, ranging from sports club via different categories of cultural organizations to informal activities together with friends and neighbours.
  - The degree of trust in institutions in the community, ranging from the political institutions such as the local council and city council via the police and the school to the public library.
  - The degree to which the respondents have confidence in the possibility of taking initiatives to improve living conditions in the community, e.g., contacting local councillors or the local administration.
2. The importance of different arenas, among them the public library, as meeting places in the community.
3. The importance of the local community in the personal lives of the respondents.
4. The degree and ways the respondents are using the library as a physical and virtual meeting place.
5. The respondents' preferences as to what their local library should do in order to promote community involvement.

In this paper focus is on no. 4, i.e. to what extent and in what ways the library is used as a meeting place.

## **The community library as a meeting place**

To what extent is the library used as a meeting place and what kinds of meetings are taking place? We asked our respondents:

- If they have participated in organized meetings in the library, e.g., meetings with politicians or authors.
- If they have used the library's Internet for social purposes such as chatting with friends, reading and sending e-mails, taking part in discussion lists or Internet groups etc.
- If they accidentally have met friends or neighbours in the library.
- If they have made appointments to meet with friends or family in the library to do something else, e.g., going to the cinema, go shopping etc.
- If they have met with friends and colleagues in order to work with a common interest or task in the library.
- If they have used the library in order to collect information on organizations and activities in the community in which to engage.
- If they have used the library to acquire information on community issues or social issues in general in which they are engaged.
- If they have entered into conversations with strangers in the library.
- If they have encountered meetings through which they have observed something they did not know before about people different from themselves, e.g., people belonging to other cultures.

The kind of meetings this question aims at eliciting can be grouped into six categories:

1. The library as a public space and a low threshold social meeting place - a place for accidental meetings and conversations, for making appointments to do something else.
2. A meeting place between meeting places, i.e., an arena where you can find information about and be directed to other meeting places in the community.
3. A public sphere in its own right where political and cultural ideas are presented and discussed.
4. An arena where you can acquire the information and knowledge you need to be an active, involved and participating citizen.
5. An arena where you live out professional or private involvements together with colleagues and friends.
6. An arena for virtual meetings on the web.

We see from the table below that the local public library is an important meeting place along all these dimensions. Its role as a public square in the community where you meet friends and neighbours, enter into conversations with friends and neighbours but also, to a very considerable degree, with strangers, is apparently the most important. It is a striking and important finding that such a high percentage in all communities, but particularly in the multicultural community, state that the library is a meeting place where they encounter, observe and learn about people different from themselves.

The meeting with the highest score is encounters with people belonging to a different culture, and where one has observed and experienced things about these cultures. It seems fair to conclude, however, that all kinds of meetings achieve a considerable score and that the complexity of meetings taking place in the public library may indicate a special potential as a meeting place.

There are two striking differences between our three communities: virtual meetings are more important in the gentrified community than in the two others and encounters where one observe and learn things about people different from oneself are more important in the multicultural community, i.e., the most multicultural community, than in the two others. Both findings are important and underline the library's potential partly as a multicultural and physical meeting place, partly as a bridge between the geographically defined community and the world wide web.

	<b>Gentrified community</b>	<b>Multicultural community</b>	<b>Middle class community</b>
Participated in meetings	14	13	12
Used internet for chatting,			

discussion groups etc.	26	10	11
Accidentally met friends/neighbours	38	44	39
Met friends in order to do something else	16	6	12
Met friends or colleagues to work with a common task/interest	24	23	18
Information on other activities or organizations in the community	32	23	28
Acquired knowledge on community matters	20	17	21
Entered into conversation with strangers	32	38	39
Observed things about people different from myself	42	54	39

**Table 1. Meetings taking place in the library according to community**

When the variable of education is introduced, the picture from table 1 is deepened and enriched. We see that in the gentrified community, the library is more important for those with a low educational level than for those with a high educational level when it comes to certain kinds of meetings, in particular ICT and web-based meetings and meetings with friends to work with a common task or interest. This might reflect a) the library's potential with respect to giving all strata of society, also those with low education, access to ICT and the Internet, b) the particular age distribution in the gentrified society with a large proportion of people in their twenties, and the importance of virtual meeting places as well as room for face to face meetings to engage with friends and colleagues on common tasks and interests for this age group. We also see that the middle class community faces challenges in reaching those with a low education with meetings in the library, with information on other activities and organizations in the local community, and with information on community matters.

	<b>Gentrified community</b>		<b>Multicultural community</b>		<b>Middle class community</b>	
	<b>Education high</b>	<b>Education low</b>	<b>Education high</b>	<b>Education low</b>	<b>Education high</b>	<b>Education low</b>
Participated at meetings	15	10	16	8	14	4
Used internet for chatting, discussion groups etc	10	27	11	10	10	11
Accidentally met friends/neighbours	35	46	46	32	29	32
Met friends in order to do something else	15	15	13	10	9	8
Met friends or colleagues to work with a common task/interest	21	40	27	22	17	30
Information on						

other activities or organizations in the community	33	33	34	28	23	11
Acquired knowledge on community matters	23	21	14	12	18	11
Entered into conversation with strangers	33	37	33	29	28	26
Observed things about people different from myself	44	50	55	53	32	37

**Table 2. Meetings taking place in the library according to community and level of education**

## Preliminary conclusions

The preliminary main conclusions from the data are:

What first and foremost seems to characterize the public library as a meeting place is complexity. A wide range of meetings take place: Informal meetings with friends, unplanned encounters, participation in virtual arenas, organized meetings with politicians and authors etc. This result indicates that libraries are arenas permitting its users to move more or less without friction between different kinds of meetings and different life spheres. It is an arena where you can be neighbour, student, and citizen simultaneously, and you can engage in meetings and activities differing in intensity. In the perspective of integrating newcomers from other cultures this is important. In the library newcomers can observe and engage in low-threshold activities and gradually move over into more demanding activities in the community. This is a fundamental part of legitimate peripheral participation - a key concept in empowerment strategies.

The library also opens up for integrating virtual activities on the web with physical and face to face activities with fellow citizens in the community. It combines being a low intensive meeting place with being an arena where people engage intensely in common undertakings, and it combines being a public sphere where discourse takes place with being an arena where people prepare for taking part in discourse on other arenas.

The concept of low intensive meeting places where people become aware of each other across cultural heritages, and across differences in values and perspectives, seems to be fruitful. Particularly in the multicultural community and particularly among immigrants people tend to answer that they in the library have observed and learnt about people belonging to groups different from themselves, for example, different ethnic groups.

In later stages of the project we will analyse more in depth the relationship between the library as a meeting place on the one hand, and social trust and bridging social capital on the other.

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society, characterized by multiculturalism and digitization, faces new challenges as to establishing that minimum of cross cultural communication and understanding that community involvement and democracy presuppose. Can the public library, which we know is frequented by most segments in society, function as a meeting place promoting social capital, and fostering that critical mass of cross cultural communication and trust important for democratic processes and economic development? The Research Council of Norway funds the project for the next four years.

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