

Investigating the ‘Why?’ rather than the ‘How?’: current research priorities on the influence of culture on new-comer populations’ use of public libraries

Abstract

Introduction. *Library researchers are often concerned with the factors that affect individual use of public library resources. To date, culture as a determinant of public library use has not been fully explored across all public library populations.*

Method. *As preparation for a larger study, a literature review on the information behaviours, and the use of public library resources, by new-comer populations was completed. This output was based on a literature search on commercial databases and Google Scholar. Thematic concept mapping surfaced relevant seams of extant literature of interest to the broader study.*

Results. *Much of the literature cites socio-cultural/cultural factors as important influences on resource use in public libraries. However, few articulate these factors in detail, nor define their relationship to information behaviour and use. In addition, consideration of new-comer populations is often absent in these analyses.*

Conclusion. *There is a case for further investigation on the influence of culture on new-comer populations’ use of public libraries. It is anticipated that improved understanding in this domain will help determine improved public library provision for new-comer populations.*

Keywords: culture; information behaviour; library use

Introduction

Based on the work of Brady *et al.* (2018) and Shoham and Rabinovich (2008), culture can be understood as a population’s values systems, patterns of behaviours, and accepted norms derived from historical traditions and passed from one generation to the next. In library and information science research it is posited that culture influences the behavioural patterns of individuals, including their interactions with information resources (Kitayama and Uskul, 2011). In addition, in respect of *specific populations*, researchers have suggested that public library use may be influenced by culture (Burke, 2008; Caidi and Allard, 2005; Kitayama and Uskul, 2011; Pyati *et al.*, 2008). An understanding of these culturally-motivated interactions allows library staff to better tailor their services and collections to their full range of users (Burke, 2008; Kumaran and Salt, 2010; McKnight, 2009; WTYL Steering Group, 2008), taking into account that not all users use the same library resources, nor indeed do they all expect the same resources to be provided (Sbaffi and Rowley, 2015; Shoham and Rabinovich, 2008).

New-comer populations i.e. migrant workers, immigrants, international students, and refugees, often have information behaviours and information needs that are different from those of established community members (Khoir *et al.*, 2015; Lloyd, 2017; Oh and Butler, 2019; Sin and Kim, 2013). These are discussed extensively in the extant body of work (e.g., Fisher *et al.*, 2004; Hassan and Wolfram, 2019; Johnston, 2016; Khoir *et al.*, 2017; Kumaran and Salt, 2010; Linden *et al.*, 2014; Lloyd *et al.*, 2013; Peterson, 2014; Williment and Jones-Grant, 2012; WTYL Steering Group; 2008).

This body of work, while not small, may be further developed to include consideration of populations, and sub-groups of these populations, that currently are not so well represented in the research (Lloyd, 2017). Further development may also include deeper investigation into specific factors which drive the unique information behaviours and needs that new-comer populations exhibit.

To date, few researchers have examined the factors that determine the reasons *why* sub-groups of new-comer library users exhibit certain information behaviours. Nor has much research endeavour been dedicated to explorations of the reasons *why* particular public library resources are more popular than others amongst new-comer populations. There is a case to be made for further research on the influence of culture on public library use in new-comer populations that has questions of ‘why’ (rather than ‘how’) as its focus. The likelihood that cultural factors are important here determines the research question addressed in this literature review.

Research Question: Where does the question of culture fit in the LIS literature on the provision of services for new-comer library user populations?

Method

For this paper, a literature search was completed to capture prior work on information behaviour and public library resource use amongst new-comer populations. This was in preparation for a future empirical study on the topic. The literature search was conducted on both the ExLibris-hosted catalogue of an academic library, and on Google Scholar. The accessibility of the academic library catalogue, the nature of the research as a scoping exercise, and the ability to access multiple library research databases (including subject-specific databases such as LISA and LISTA) simultaneously drove the decision to use the academic library catalogue. Subject filters were used to narrow down search results, as required. Initial searches on the catalogue were conducted using combinations of the search terms shown in Table 1.

| Term 1 | | Term 2 | Subject Filter 1 | Subject Filter 2 |
|--------------------------|-----|--------------|------------------|------------------|
| Library use | AND | Refugee(s) | | |
| Library use | | Refugee(s) | Library science | Public libraries |
| Information world(s) | | | | |
| Information behaviour(s) | | Immigrant(s) | | |

Table 1: Literature search term combinations for library catalogue and Google Scholar

Additional searches using the same research terms were conducted on Google Scholar. A further search on Google Scholar included the search phrase in Table 2. In total, the search yielded 41 papers cited in this review.

| Term 1 | | Term 2 | | Term 3 |
|-------------|-----|---------|-----|----------|
| Library use | AND | Culture | AND | Refugees |

Table 2: Additional Google Scholar literature search term combinations

Citation pearling was also deployed during the process of reviewing the papers identified from the search.

After the relevant papers were gathered, they were examined and coded manually to identify prevalent themes of relevance to the research question. Special attention was paid to definitions of ‘culture’ and articulations of new-comer populations, resources provided by public libraries, and common methodologies deployed in reports of empirical studies. The information from the papers relating to the broad themes, e.g., information behaviours, resources provided by public libraries, etc., were grouped together and hierarchical connections between groups were mapped. From this, the results of the literature review could be prepared as narrative, as follows.

Results

Three broad findings are identified from the review of the literature:

1. Much more is known about *how*, but less about *why*, new-comer populations use public libraries.
2. Much of this prior research is based on ‘black box’ case studies, so the application of their recommendations in contexts other than those described in the case studies presented is difficult to assess.
3. A large portion of the research is focused on the perspective of librarians as service *providers*, rather than new-comers as service *users*.

These three findings are explored in greater detail below.

Literature review finding 1: ‘how’ versus ‘why’

There is a good foundation in the literature on the ways in which new-comers use public library resources. In many papers, the most used resources are identified, as the resources that new-comers request most often (Al-Qallaf and Mika, 2009; Berger, 2002; Burke, 2008; Fisher *et al.*, 2004; Hassan and Wolfram, 2019; Johnston, 2016; Khoir *et al.*, 2017; Linden *et al.*, 2014; Peterson, 2014; Shepherd *et al.*, 2018; Shoham and Rabinovich, 2008; Silvio, 2006). This usage is primarily considered through the analysis of quantitative data, such as borrowing statistics and attendance numbers (Aabø and Audunson, 2012; Audunso *et al.*, 2011; Fisher *et al.*, 2004; Huysmans and Oomes, 2013; Johnston, 2016, 2018; Linden *et al.*, 2014). Qualitative measures are also deployed in this work, for example to provide a degree of understanding about new-comers’ perceptions of public library services (Aabø and Audunson, 2012; Audunson *et al.*, 2011; Fisher *et al.*, 2004; Khoir *et al.*, 2017; Kumaran and Salt, 2010; Linden *et al.*, 2014; Shepherd *et al.*, 2018; Silvio, 2006; Williment and Jones-Grant, 2012). The resources and services with which new-comer populations engage most frequently are summarised in Table 3.

| In public libraries newcomers use/engage with | Identified by | Notes |
|--|---|---|
| Print material | Berger (2002); Burke (2008); Fisher <i>et al.</i> , (2004); Shepherd <i>et al.</i> , (2018) | With the exception of Berger (2002), all note that this usage is comparable to established communities. |
| Computers | Berger (2002); Burke (2008); Fisher <i>et al.</i> , (2004); Shepherd <i>et al.</i> , (2018) | |
| Physical space for personal and professional tasks | Aabø and Audunson (2012); Audunson <i>et al.</i> , (2011); Berger (2002); Shepherd <i>et al.</i> , (2018) | There is particularly high usage amongst female users from religiously conservative families (Audunson <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Berger, 2002; Shepherd <i>et al.</i> , 2018) |
| Resources to learn the language of host countries | Burke (2008); Fisher <i>et al.</i> , (2004); Johnston (2016); Khoir <i>et al.</i> , (2017); Kumaran and Salt (2010); Linden <i>et al.</i> , (2014); Shepherd <i>et al.</i> , (2018) | |
| Citizenship classes | Fisher <i>et al.</i> (2004); Vårheim (2014) | |
| Native language resources | Al-Qallaf and Mika (2009); Audunson <i>et al.</i> , (2011); Burke (2008); Linden <i>et al.</i> , (2014); Shoham and Rabinovich, (2008) | Provision is constrained by the budgets of 'host' public libraries (Linden <i>et al.</i> , 2014; Shoham and Rabinovich, 2008) |

Table 3: Public library resources and services most used by newcomer populations

In terms of the motivations for the public library usage summarised above, the main categories of determinant are identified as linguistic, economic, and cultural (Burke, 2008; Caidi and Komlodi, 2003; Fisher *et al.*, 2004; Hassan and Wolfram, 2019; Khoir *et al.*, 2015; Kumaran and Salt, 2010; Lloyd 2017; Peterson, 2014). However, the analysis of the third category cited here - cultural factors - is very limited, as has been noted by Burke (2008), Burnett (2015), and Caidi and Komlodi (2003). For example, the analysis undertaken for this literature review shows that researchers tend to assume, without question, nor without defining the term, that culture has an influence on public library use. Shoham and Rabinovich (2008) are the exception here: they defined 'culture' in their paper. In some cases, the studies of culture are also flawed. For example, Burke (2008), and Lloyd (2017) acknowledge researcher bias in the literature that they reviewed to preface their own studies. There is thus an opportunity to make a contribution here in respect of culture, public library use, and new-comer

populations. This will add to the body of work on culture and information behaviours in general, such as that of Gaston *et al.* (2015).

Literature review finding 2: specific versus generalisable recommendations

A facet of the literature reviewed for this paper is the inclusion of recommendations on serving new-comer populations in public libraries (Johnston, 2016, 2018; Kumaran and Salt, 2010; Vimercati and Pirola, 2011; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2004; Vårheim, 2011, 2014; WTYL Steering Group, 2008). However, these are often based on ‘black box’ case studies related to a specific type of public library or geographic region (Berger, 2002; Fisher *et al.*, 2004; Khan, 2009; Kumaran and Salt, 2010; Silvio, 2006; Williment and Jones-Grant, 2012). Although useful, the findings from these studies may not be generalisable, and recommendations not transferable from one context to another. It has also been argued that recommendations made in these studies are rarely supported by detailed analysis of the factors that generated them (Fisher *et al.*, 2004; Johnston, 2016; Kumaran and Salt, 2010; Silvio, 2006).

Literature review finding 3: the perspective of service providers, rather than service users

The third main finding from the review of the literature concerns the emphasis of prior work on new-comer populations and public libraries. This favours the perspective of service providers (Allen, 2001; Sbaffi and Rowley, 2015; Shoham and Rabinovich, 2008; Vårheim, 2011), and the resources they offer (Kumaran and Salt, 2010; Peterson, 2014; Silvio, 2006; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2004), rather than that of new-comers. For example, in Johnston’s 2016 account of new-comers’ use of a conversation-based public library programme, it is the impact of the programme on the new-comers that is prioritised.

Conclusion

Cultural factors are likely to influence new-comers’ use of public library resources. Current discussion on this topic, however, is sparse in the literature reviewed for this paper. There is a much greater emphasis on the types of public library resources that new-comers use than on the reasons for their use. Cultural factors are often cited as influential, but - to date - have not been explored empirically. In addition, culture itself is rarely defined in terms of library research, and so becomes an ambiguous term that may mean different things for different researchers. The scarcity of empirical work on the influence of cultural factors on public library use, and the lack of clarity surrounding a definition of culture in library science, are gaps in the field. These themes are ripe for research attention. The development of an understanding of the cultural factors related to public library use in new-comer populations based on a strong empirical study will generate valuable recommendations for improved public library services delivery to new-comer populations.

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