

Public Library use in New York City

Studies on library use have traditionally emphasized the demographic, economic, and cultural characteristics of library users at the state and national levels.¹ On this paper, I chose a research article on neighborhood analysis in New York City entitled “A Neighborhood Analysis of Public Library Use in New York City” by Andrea C. Japzon and Hongmian Gong from the *Library Quarterly* published in 2005. This study examines public library use within a neighborhood and investigates the relationship between public library use and neighborhood characteristics that extend beyond race, class, and education. The researchers chose New York because of its diversity.

Japzon and Gong asserted that the traditional studies of library users which only include the demographic, economic, and cultural characteristics of library users is insufficient to completely understand library users. They believe that there is a strong correlation between social and spatial interaction and public library use. Therefore they argued that social and spatial interactions within a neighborhood facilitate public library use. The objective of this paper is to find ways to improve the “vitality of underutilized libraries in poor neighborhoods.” The researchers also view that the revitalization of these libraries will have positive effects on the neighborhoods, including access to

¹ Japzon, Andrea and Hongmian Gong. “A Neighborhood Analysis of Public Library Use In New York City.” *Library Quarterly*, vo. 75, no 4 (2005): 447.

information resources, resident participation, and neighborhood regeneration. The methodology they used is correlation and regression analyses for all 200 libraries. They also used bivariate correlation analyses to explore the relationship between public library use and education, income, and racial factors in neighborhoods. Multivariate regression analysis evaluated the influences of neighborhood characteristics such as economic, demographics, education, and class to public library use. A Thiessen polygon around the location of each branch defined the service area of the libraries studied. Social interaction was analyzed by looking into the social capital. They defined social capital as “the connections among individuals, such as social networks, norms of reciprocity, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”² They claimed that positive effects come from voluntary participation of a large number of people in civic activities such as voting, being associated with non-profit organizations, attending church, league bowling, etc. They used the number of non-profit organization to equate to social capital. They argued that an increase number of NGOs or non-profit organizations mean higher social capital.

The research found that public library use cannot simply be explained using just traditional factors such as race, class, and education. They concluded that social connections, racial diversity, and integration stimulate public library use. They found that Asians, with their significant presence in New York, are another major group of public library users contrary to the common belief that library users are typically white, middle class, and well educated. They also found that adult population with only a high school diploma uses the library most often than college graduates.

² Ibid.

The researchers' backgrounds qualify them for the technical aspect of this research. Andrea C. Japzon has published several articles including the "Electronic Collection Management and Information Services" and "A Narrative History of Resource Sharing in the State of Maryland." She is also the Chair for NASA Goddard Space Flight Center. Hongmian Gong on the other hand is an Assistant Professor of Geography in Hunter College. She has written articles on the public transit in New York City and has worked on the NASA EOS Higher Education Project. Her Research interests are Urban Geography, GIS, quantitative analysis, and China.

This research is significant because it addresses the problem of underutilization of public libraries by poor neighborhoods. This is important because lack of access to information by a group of people is a social justice issue. As the researchers argue the improvement of library use in these areas mean greater access to information, resources, education, and social segregation for underprivileged communities. Social segregation happens in neighborhoods where crime, poverty, and race segregation is prevalent.

This research is strong for several reasons. First, it uses spatial and social interactions in neighborhoods in addition to race, class, and education in the analysis of public library use. By doing this they offer readers a new insight on public library use in a metropolis with a diverse population. I also found that the authors' use of GIS to create the Thiessen polygons for the library branches was different. Most research I found on public library use of underprivileged communities uses a survey on recent literature and surveys as methodologies. The polygon was used to prove their spatial interaction argument. This is based on an assumption in central-place theory that a consumer patronizes the closest central place. It showed the distance of users to the libraries within

a service area. By using the polygon, service areas are converted into spatial units. The polygon also makes it easier to determine who belongs in specific areas. In this way they could use the census tracts to obtain the characteristics of each area. This also became the basis of their data for their correlation and regression analysis. Furthermore, the use of correlation and regression analysis seems to be appropriate methods and analysis to their research. Second, the research, as stated earlier, also defied old beliefs that typical library users are white, middle class, and with a high educational level. In addition, they also found that Asians and adults with only high school diplomas were frequent library users. It also confirms that low income communities as well as Hispanics and Blacks used the libraries the least.

Although the authors demonstrate a command in relevant technical literature on spatial interaction, they failed to include sufficient literature on race and class. While citing one study on Hispanics and Blacks, they did not include Asians and Whites at all. This is significant information because their study is not only on spatial interactions but also on social interactions within neighborhoods.

On the social interaction argument, it would have been more significant if they used other methods to determine the social interaction of neighborhoods rather than use an on-line directory and census to obtain the number of non-profit organizations in a service area. The authors suggest that the number of NGOs indicate the social involvement of residents. Although they found no significant correlation between NGO per capita and social interactions, it would have been useful to conduct a survey within this NGO to determine whether resident are actually involved. However, I do not find

the presence of NGOs to necessarily mean that local residents are involved in their activities.

I did not find any significant flaws in the methods, arguments, and analyses. The strength of this paper is that the authors offered new insight on users of public libraries in a diverse metropolis. Finally, although the authors were able to successfully argue the spatial interaction argument, they fell short on their social interactions as indicative of public library use argument. The NGO argument even if they found any significance from their analysis is not enough to back up their thesis that social interactions influence public library use. It was a weak rationale. Despite this weakness, I still found it interesting to read.

Reference

Japzon, Andrea and Hongmian Gong. "A Neighborhood Analysis of Public Library Use In New York City." *Library Quarterly*, vo. 75, no 4 (2005): 446-463.