

## Public Libraries – Arenas for Citizenship and Promoters of Social Capital

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## Research questions

- In what ways do people take the public library as a public space and meeting place into use?
- Can the public library contribute in generating social capital?
- Low intensive versus high intensive meeting places
- The interplay between physical and digital meeting place
- The effect of multiculturalism on the need for meeting places

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## Research problem

- Citizenship implies community. Developing community is not trivial in a digital and multicultural context
- To develop welfare and social well being, a level between the market and the state – civil society is needed
- Can the public library contribute?

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### The promises of the multicultural and digital society

- More society – it increases the number of people we can be in society with
- Dynamic, fruitful and creative contact between different cultures
- A richer society
- Growth in social capital

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### The threats of the multicultural and digital society

- Fragmentation and less society
- People construct their own universes where they are not exposed to people representing other values and interests than their own
- Less tolerance
- Less social capital, less trust, more conflict
- Instead of multiculturalism: parallel unidimensional communities – or fragmented individuals

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### Basic concepts

- Social capital
- Community
- Citizenship
- High intensive versus low intensive meeting places

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## Social capital

- That glue of trust, common values, participation and networks keeping a society together
- Two forms of social capital:
  - Bonding social capital
  - Bridging social capital
- Bridging social capital particularly important for generalized trust and democracy in a multicultural society
- In today's society one has to plan for and consciously construct arenas promoting bridging social capital

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## Different perspectives on social capital

- The bottom-up perspective: Social capital is created in face to face interactions: bowling with others, going to public meetings, attending dinner parties
- The top down perspective: Social capital and trust is generated by universal welfare arrangements
- Studying social capital in the framework of public libraries opens up for combining the perspectives

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## The initial survey

Aims at measuring

- Social capital measured as participation in the community and trust
- The role of different meeting places in the community
- The way the library is used as a meeting place

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## The sample

- 750 persons from four different communities in Oslo, varying according to multiculturalism and social-economic indicators: One low status community with a high proportion of immigrants, one gentrified inner city community, one bourgeois community

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## How important is the local community in people's lives?

- More important for people in the low status community than for people in the bourgeois and gentrified community
- More important for the low educated than the high educated
- More important for young than for old
- More important for the users of the local library than the non users

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## Trust in institutions (0=no trust, 10=max. trust)

	Gent	Low status	Bourgeois
Local council	6,64	5,27	5,94
City council	5,82	5,00	5,55
Parliament	6,36	5,25	5,39
School	7,18	5,82	5,61
Politiet	7,15	6,61	6,48
Folkebiblioteket	8,55	7,82	7,39

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## Meetings in the library

- Every 6th person has participated at organized meetings in the library
- Every 6th – in the gentrified community every 4th has used Internet for social purposes
- 40 per cent have accidentally met friend and neighbours
- Every 4th has met friends/colleagues to work on a common task or interest
- Every 3rd has found information on other activities in the community – i.e. the library functions as a portal to involvement
- Almost 40 per cent have acquired information on community issues/social issues they are engaged in
- From 32 to 39 per cent have entered into conversation with strangers
- From 39 to 54 per cent have observed and learned things about people different from themselves

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## The library is a complex meeting place

- A market place where you are exposed to social life in its complexity
- A market place for accidental meetings
- A public sphere in its own right
- A high intensive meeting place
- A meta-meeting place – a portal to

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## The library as a meeting place and the core services of the library

- People use libraries to fulfill their cultural and informational needs and interests, not because of the library's role as a meeting place. (Just as kids join a football club because they like playing football, not because its role as a multicultural meeting place)

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