Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Public Libraries Help Patrons of Color to Bridge the Digital Divide, but Barriers Remain

Pun, R. (2021). Understanding the roles of public libraries and digital exclusion through critical race theory: An exploratory study of people of color in California affected by the digital divide and the pandemic. Urban Library Journal, 26(2). https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ulj/vol26/iss2/1/

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

Découvrir la revue

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:
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Abstract

Objective – This study explored the role of the public library in the support of patrons of color who experience digital exclusion.

Design – In-person and telephone interviews, grounded theory, and critical race theory.

Setting – Public libraries in California.

Subjects – Persons of color who were active public library technology resource users due to experiencing the digital divide.

Methods – In-person, 60- to 90-minute interviews were conducted with participants referred to the author by public librarians at select libraries in California. Sixteen open-ended questions were asked, relating to demographics, access to technology at home, library technology access and use, technology skills, and thoughts on how libraries could change or improve technology services. A 20- to 30-minute follow-up interview was conducted during the phase of the Covid-19 pandemic when public libraries were closed. Interview transcripts were analyzed by the author, who created a codebook of common themes. Responses were analyzed through the lens of grounded theory and critical race theory.

Main Results – Nine participants were recruited; six consented to the first interview and two of the six consented to the second interview. Four of the participants self-reported as Asian, one as Black/African American, and one as Hispanic/Latino American. None of the participants had internet access in their homes, though some reported having laptops or inconsistent cellular service.

Common uses of library technology included job search activities (resume building, job searching, applications); schoolwork; research and skill development; and legal or housing form finding. Leisure activities including social media and YouTube were also mentioned.

Access limitations included inconvenient library hours, particularly for those attending college or holding a job with daytime hours, and physical distance from the library. A common complaint was the time limit on computer access set by the library; "the concept of time" was mentioned "over 70 times collectively by all participants" (p. 14).

Language was another barrier to access, mentioned by three of the participants. Most reported being more likely to ask for help from a library staff person who shared their language or had a similar background. Participants also reported wishing more technology workshops were offered, especially workshops in languages other than English.

The two participants who took part in the second interview "expressed frustration and sadness" about the lack of library access during the Covid-19 pandemic (p. 16). One participant reported having to get internet access at her home for her children to attend school. The second participant expressed her difficulty in conducting research or printing information with only the small screen of her phone to provide access.

Conclusion – Library patrons of color living within the digital divide make use of public library technology but experience multiple barriers. Libraries can alleviate these barriers by examining their hours, policies, and staffing models to be more accessible to patrons of color lacking internet access at home.

Commentary

Letts et al.'s (2007) questionnaire, *Critical Review Form for Qualitative Studies*, was used for this analysis. The study's purpose was clearly explained through an extensive literature review and discussion of critical race theory (CRT), the theoretical framework employed. The interview questions were, for the most part, constructed so that participants could answer with as much or as little information as they felt comfortable sharing. However, Question 11 could have been leading as written: "What are the benefits of using the library computer compared to home?" This question would be less leading if posed as "Are there any benefits to using the library computer compared to home?" Since many participants mentioned language barriers in response to Question 13, "If there's a library staff member who shares a similar background as you, are you more willing to ask for help? Why or why not?", further research should include language as a variable.

While the interview method is an appropriate choice for the questions asked in this study, the full study design was not clear as described. It is not clear how the (very small) participant group was chosen for this study. The methods section explains that participants were chosen "through a referral process by public librarians in select libraries in California," though there is no explanation of how the libraries were chosen or how the librarians referred participants to the researcher (p. 7). In the author's discussion of study limitations, he states that there may have been participants who "did not see the opportunity to participate in this study," but it is not explained how they would have learned about the study (p. 18). There is also no discussion, beyond that it was IRB approved, as to where the interviews took place or whether participants were compensated for their time. Another concern is that the original interviews took place prior to the start of the pandemic, which indicates that the study design was altered to include the second interviews. Additionally, the interviews

were transcribed and the codebook was developed after both sets of interviews had been conducted, which could have potentially affected how the codebook was created (p. 8).

While the evidence provided from these interviews is of enough interest to drive further studies and should certainly be used by library systems as an impetus to survey their own users and communities at large, the sample size of six is not enough to afford generalization to all populations. The interview questions used in this study could be adapted by other library systems to learn more about their communities and their service needs, particularly in terms of staffing and technology needs. The results can help libraries focus on areas that need improvement and how to remove barriers to access and service.

References

American Library Association. (2006, July 7). *Access to digital resources and services: An interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights.* http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/digital

Letts, L., Wilkins, S., Law, M., Stewart, D., Bosch, J., & Westmorland, M. (2007). *Critical review form – Qualitative studies (version 2.0).* http://www.peelregion.ca/health/library/eidmtools/qualreview_version2_0.pdf