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Public libraries as places for self-directed lifelong learning: narratives of empowerment

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Introduction. The purpose of this study is to explore how library-based study groups in Japanese public libraries serve as arenas for citizens' self-directed learning, and the role played in the lives of the group members.

Method. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants, focussing on the backgrounds and interests of the study group members.

Analysis. Categorical content analysis was implemented to clarify the three research questions 1) Recognition of public libraries as a place for self-directed learning and citizens' empowerment, 2) Relationships with other group members and 3) Affiliations with public libraries.

Results. The groups provided arenas in which members could pursue self-directed learning; develop meaningful adult relationships; and through which they could affect positive change in their communities.

Conclusions. The study groups were perceived as tools for self-realisation and libraries as places where study group members could satisfy their intellectual needs. Participation in the study groups also fostered group members' civic awareness and gave them outlets for civic engagement related to the promotion of literacy and, more broadly, education.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47989/irpaper888>

Introduction

The mission of public libraries is to promote an informed citizenry and democratic decision making through the provision of information and support for intellectual freedom. Closely connected to this is the support provided for citizens' lifelong learning, which has always been one of the fundamental roles of public libraries.

These values are enshrined in the Japanese Library Law which states, 'Libraries offer a diversity of educational opportunities for informal learning activities' (Library Law, [2011](#)). In other words, Japanese libraries are mandated to serve as arenas for informal, self-directed learning.

Nevertheless, citizens' self-directed learning in local libraries is facing a critical time under the influence of neoliberalism and dominance of capitalistic values and the increasing privatisation of services. The neoliberal shift away from welfare provision fundamentally conflicts with the values of public libraries, specifically the provision of equal access to services and resources that support citizens' lifelong learning.

Jaeger, Taylor and Gorham ([2015](#), pp. 116-118) discuss the mechanism by which public services are weakened by a combination of neoliberalism and the economic ideology of the new conservatism. Neoliberal policies have not only weakened the economic foundations of the library by reducing library budgets but have also undermined the public value of library services by subjecting them to market principles. Furthermore, and of great concern, Elmborg ([2016](#), p. 550) reports the negative influence of neoliberalism on lifelong learning, a core value of public libraries.

The existence of a public library can be regarded as a countermeasure to the privatisation of cultural administration that is progressing worldwide, fuelled by neoliberalism. Given this situation, public libraries need more than ever to be considered for their role in supporting equal opportunities for lifelong learning and subsequent citizen empowerment. Therefore, this study investigates self-directed learning groups in public libraries to elicit a greater understanding of the value of the public library as a public institution supporting lifelong learning and in its broader support for democracy.

Study groups at public libraries in Japan

Lifelong learning conducted in public libraries has developed to the extent that it now encompasses a wide range of activities. There are numerous voluntary study groups at public libraries in Japan. There are many groups related to children's services, such as storytelling. They are committed to library programs as volunteer staff and pursue self-directed learning to improve their skills in providing library services for children.

There also are other learning groups. It is noteworthy that many of these choose public libraries themselves as their study themes. They have explored public library best

practice and study the philosophy and system of public libraries. These groups focusing on public libraries are unique to Japan. The reason for the existence of proportionally so many study groups which adopt public librarianship as their themes reflects the specific history of the public library system in Japan. The forerunners of these groups were activists who developed an extensive grassroots movement in the 1970s to call for the establishment of public libraries. The activities of the interviewees in this study have their origin in 1970s grassroots movements that were dedicated to establishing and upgrading public libraries. Active individuals demanding good library services organised self-directed study groups and independently learned about public libraries. These movements were generally led by women, full-time homemakers whose shared goal was to ensure the best reading environment for their children. The women were particularly interested in children's literature. They read children's literature together and discussed what were the best books for their children. At that time, the public library system was underdeveloped, and the women's involvement focused on demanding the establishment of local libraries and/or suitable library services for local citizens. Interestingly, even after public library services were set up in response to their efforts, many of these groups chose to maintain their involvement.

These study groups often use volunteer groups or Friends of the Library groups as their base of activity. However, while the main purpose of the activities of volunteer groups and Friends of the Library groups is to support public libraries, the purpose of study groups is self-directed learning by group members. For more than half a century, these groups have examined the significance of both the existence and the potential of public library services. In spite of these group members' considerable experience and copious records of their activities, researchers have not focused any attention from an academic perspective on the groups in question. This paper aims to investigate and build a broad picture of the individuals who have engaged in lifelong learning centred on local libraries in Japan.

Literature review

As will become apparent in the findings, the experiences of study groups directly connect to the empowerment of the group members and their increased civic awareness, which are two dominant themes running through the library literature.

Goulding ([2009](#)) focuses on citizens' engagement with public libraries from a macro perspective and notes collective empowerment. This study showed how public libraries were used as foci for community activities and clarified their close partnerships with local voluntary groups. Goulding ([2013](#)) further examines citizens' involvement with public libraries and shows the results of their involvement to be connected to community empowerment. This paper explored the possibilities of civic engagement through the commitment of local residents to community-managed libraries. These studies explored citizens' self-directed involvement in relation to the functions of public libraries connecting to citizen empowerment.

Several researchers have examined how public libraries function as arenas for civic activity that build social capital (Johnson, [2012](#); Johnston, [2016](#), Miller, [2014](#); Vårheim, [2011](#); Vårheim, [2007](#)). There has also been some research on the characteristics of public libraries, exploring the potential for citizens' multipurpose cultural involvement from the viewpoint of public spaces (Aabø and Audunson, [2012](#); Aabø et al., [2010](#); Jochumsen et al., [2012](#)). There has been some research on specific programs conducted in public libraries that investigated the relationship between libraries and participants (Prigoda and McKenzie, [2007](#); Walwyn and Rowley, [2011](#)). Their research spotlighted the individual experiences of participants at libraries and identified the values of the group and of the program. These studies explored citizens' self-directed involvement in relation to the functions of public libraries connecting to the empowerment of citizens.

Although past studies have focused on spaces or particular programs conducted in libraries, survey analyses focusing on individual lifelong learners in public libraries are insufficient. The author examined the cultural roles of public libraries in boosting the empowerment of their patrons (Yoshida, [2013](#)) and suggested that local citizens autonomously designed the spaces they use for their lifelong learning (Yoshida, [2016](#)). Siew ([2006](#)) examined volunteer groups in Singapore and showed public libraries to be spaces that encourage the citizenry to become more active.

These studies showed the potential for public libraries to act as arenas for civic involvement and lifelong learning as well as analysed the possibilities for public libraries to foster the empowerment of participants. An examination focusing on individual members is needed to more fully articulate the mechanism of lifelong learning in public libraries. This paper uses data from the participants' own accounts. This methodology permits a more detailed analysis of the involvement of the group and the ways in which the members are empowered. The previous studies mostly considered the relationship between library users and libraries in terms of top-down initiatives. By introducing a narrative methodology, however, it becomes possible to understand the process of self-directed learning from the perspective of bottom-up initiatives focusing on library users.

Theoretical framework

This paper examines the essential value of the public library's function for lifelong learning, focusing on the history of members of study groups. At the same time, this research will explore public libraries as mechanisms for boosting the empowerment of participants of study groups. To analyse the activities of the study groups, the concept of the public sphere is introduced. The reason for introducing this concept is that the activities of the members of the group spanned both the public sphere and the private realm. Although the activities of the learning group were essentially conducted in the private realm, activities such as discussions and negotiations with local libraries and municipal authorities were developed in the public sphere.

The public sphere is theorised as an arena in which public opinion can be formed (Habermas [1964](#), p. 49). The private sphere is defined as a concept opposed to the public sphere and as a sphere without the position of the public (Habermas, [1992](#), p. 11). Previous research has treated public libraries and the public sphere from practical and philosophical viewpoints. Audunson et al. made a comprehensive review of current research on public libraries and the public sphere. The review showed theoretical viewpoints and research topics (Audunson et al., [2019](#)). Previous research has suggested the functions of public libraries to include contributing to the formation of the public sphere that affirms the value of democracy and fundamentally supports democratic society. Thus, while there is academic research that investigates the formation of the public spheres and the role of libraries in modern society, there are also studies that examine the public spheres from a microscopical and historical perspective. The latter looks at the process by which private learning groups expanded their activities in private realms into activities in the public realms through their involvement with public libraries. These historical studies have a high affinity with this research.

Many examples of community libraries in the United States provide a wealth of detailed evidence for involvement by ordinary citizens with libraries. Among other things, the accomplishments of women's clubs in the middle of the nineteenth century provide excellent examples (Gere [1997](#), pp. 5-11; Malone [1996](#); Watson [2003](#)). Initially, the purposes of their activities were to create their own spaces for reading programs, and these gradually served as a foundation for local libraries. Reading was transformed into a social effort connecting the women's clubs and local library movements. These cases showed public aspects to be embedded in private self-directed learning in the private sphere. Through the investigation of related materials, the author examined the universality that is extensively found regarding women's empowerment and civic engagement related to public libraries (Yoshida, [2016](#)). The author confirmed that self-directed learners boosted individual consciousness and awareness of social issues through reciprocal action between the private realms and public realms. These historical cases demonstrated that the learning outcomes of private groups contributed substantially to the formation of the public sphere. These examples can be regarded as analogous to the learning group focused on in this research and the results of these historical studies provide a theoretical framework for this paper.

Perspective of the research and research questions

The research focus of this study is in individuals' commitment to public libraries and their views on their activities there. Through a qualitative analysis of the narratives of women who use libraries as a base for their self-directed learning, this study illustrates the personal significance of lifelong learning in the context of public libraries and the details of group members involvement, and of the library as a place for citizen empowerment.

The purpose of this study is to clarify, based on interviews with members of the study groups, the nature of self-directed learning conducted in public libraries and explore the meaning that participants attached to it. The results of this study will ultimately elucidate the public value of the library as a cultural device for citizen empowerment.

The main research questions explored in this article are:

1. How did the interviewees recognised public libraries as a place for self-directed learning and citizen empowerment?
2. What was their relationship with other group members?
3. What was their relationship with the public library?

Methodology

Life history method

This paper analyses the involvement of the targeted group using a qualitative approach. Walwyn and Rowley ([2011](#), p. 304) suggest narrative interviews to be appropriate for analysing the participants who take part in library programs, since using this method allows the participants to talk about their involvement using everyday language. Their view is that in narrative interviews *'Participants' experiences will tend to be more naturally expressed and relate more closely to their actual feelings'* (Walwyn and Rowley, [2011](#), p. 304).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants. The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis in a semi-structured way and lasted about two hours. The interviewees' comments were documented using a digital voice recorder. Four women participated in the interviews for this research. The interviewees are members of study groups based in a public library who have played active roles for many years. They have made continuous efforts to create substantial learning spaces for their lifelong learning in local libraries (Yoshida, [2013](#)).

This study adopted a life history approach to in the interviews. It helps to position the activities conducted in public libraries in participants' everyday lives and to interpret them in the context of their individual lives. The use of libraries is embedded in daily life. Wiegand stressed the significance of the *'"bottom-up" "library in the life of the user" perspective'* (Wiegand, [2015](#), p. 349). He considers the latter to be more important for clarifying the essential significance of libraries. Labaree ([2006](#)) examines the effectiveness of applying the life history method to library theory and practice. He notes this qualitative research method to be effective for the theory and practice of librarianship (Labaree, [2006](#), pp. 136-137). The life history method is a way of understanding one's life overall, and, in the context of this study, facilitates a holistic understanding of the interviewees' activities in both the public and private spheres of their lives.

Interviewees' profiles

The interviewees were individuals with whom the author became acquainted when conducting past research on volunteers in public libraries. Almost all of the women who participated in these activities were full-time homemakers and did not have paid employment outside of the home. They were particularly interested in children's literature.

'*Mari*' was a homemaker when she started her first activity. She had the opportunity to take part in a study group on children's books. Her involvement has developed into a wide variety of activities, including children's literature and library services for children. She was a founder of the Friends of the Local Library. Although the mission of Japan's Friends of the Library is similar to that of their equivalents in the United States, some differences can be found between them. Whereas the friends of the libraries in the US focus on fundraising, the major focus of their Japan equivalents is building bridges between libraries and citizens.

'*Yuki*' was a homemaker when her involvement was prompted by attending a course for ordinary citizens offered by a university. After completing the course, she joined a study group on children's books and built connections with her local library. She established the Friends of the Local Library with Mari.

'*Kana*' was formerly a municipality volunteer worker. She met Mari and Yuki at an event held by their local library, after which she started activities centred on public libraries. She currently works at a public organisation that supports immigrants. She also continues with her involvement in the Friends of the local public library. Mari, Yuki, and Kana are members of the same Friends of the Local Library group.

'*Fumi*' was a homemaker when she became involved. She originally volunteered at the local library with children's services. She established a Friends of the Local Library with other group members. She proactively lobbies the municipal and national governments to move forward with the development of public libraries.

The interviewees shared three characteristics: they were university graduates; they were members of the Friends of Local Libraries groups; but did not belong to any occupational groups that might influence their self-directed learning. These experiences have had, unsurprisingly, significant impacts on the development of lifelong learning that the interviewees have been engaged in.

Procedures for qualitative analysis

Categorical content analysis is adopted in this study. This method makes it possible to interpret the meaning of narrative interviews (Walwyn & Rowley, [2011](#), p. 306). First, transcripts were investigated and categorised according to their content. Second, related statements were gathered and every category examined.

The categories of analysis are as follows.

- What prompted lifelong learning?
- Start of involvement with libraries
- Development of the activities
- Relationships with the local library and the municipal government
- Relationships with other group members

Findings

What prompted lifelong learning?

Each person had her own motivation for lifelong learning. Two cases in which the women pursued self-directed learning activities are presented here.

Yuki's motivation for lifelong learning was an open seminar at a university. She happened to take part in one in 1981. The theme of the seminar was 'Self-formation as a citizen and social education'. Although many universities currently offer a wide range of lectures that are open to the public, it was quite rare in the early 1980s for universities to offer programs to ordinary citizens. The seminar that she took had no specific requirements to participants, so anyone who was interested could attend. Despite the extremely low threshold for participation, the content of the seminar overwhelmed her. She described her impression of the seminar at the time.

I found that most of the participants were of a particular type. How can I express it [...] To me, they looked like activists in civic movements. The lecturer directed us to form groups, so I joined one. The discussion there was extremely heated. Someone asked me to talk about my experiences, but I had absolutely no experience of participation in a social movement at all [...] I couldn't really contribute much to the discussion.

She was very nervous and at first felt uncomfortable participating in the seminar:

It's just that I was feeling miserable. [...] I was simply overwhelmed by the discussion. It seemed there was a definite style and mandatory technical terms for discussions of this type. [...] The terminology was completely unfamiliar to me. I had no idea how to join in.

However, she did not give up and continued to attend the seminar. She explained that her reason for not dropping out, is her basic personality to see through to the end anything she starts. In the end, she managed to submit a final report and complete the seminar. Ultimately, participating in an open course at a university acted as a motivation for Yuki's subsequent self-directed learning. Although it was initially difficult for her, it awakened her curiosity about self-directed learning in itself.

Mari told me that her child provided her motivation to participate in a study meeting.

My child went to a kindergarten that had a well-organised library. Since I often used it, I was offered the opportunity to write a short article entitled 'Children and Children's Books'. A mother who had read the article approached me on the street and invited me to come to her study group about English picture books. We took turns offering our house as a meeting place. That was the start.

Mari's motivation for engaging in lifelong learning activities was her participation in a learning circle on English literature through a children's kindergarten. This opened the door to her learning, which led to more than forty years of interest in children's literature and the study of libraries. Yuki felt out of place at the university's open course and she could not adapt to the atmosphere of the place. Mari, however, did not feel this way, since the subject of learning was the same as her major at university. Both were homemakers who somehow managed to balance their learning with family life.

Start of involvement with libraries

Under what circumstances did they become involved with public libraries? For Mari and Yuki, it was access to a private library. Kana and Fumi, became involved with their library by joining a support organisation for public libraries that was run by ordinary citizens.

Mari explained the start of her involvement with libraries as follows.

When I lived in Tokyo, I simply took public libraries for granted. But when I moved to another prefecture in 1980, it wasn't easy to find one near my house. My friends and I then found out that public libraries have a 'group lending service'. You can borrow a large number of books at one time from public libraries. We decided to use this system to establish our own small library in a community centre.

When she started to build a small library at a community centre in the beginning of the 1980s, she was lucky to have been given some books by an acquaintance who already had a private library at another location. As already mentioned in the research background, these private libraries run by ordinary citizens were quite common in 1970s Japan, because many municipalities lacked public libraries. Private libraries run by ordinary people were the result of the poor library system in Japan. The main support for these private libraries came from homemakers with children.

A study group on public libraries was the beginning of Yuki's involvement with libraries. She took part in an open seminar at a university. Soon afterwards, one of the participants suggested forming a study group focusing on public libraries. Five of the people at the seminar agreed. It was a completely autonomous action. This experience served as the impetus for her self-directed learning. She commented, 'I realised that I had a feeling of satisfaction when engaged with social education. [...] I liked it very much'.

Numerous independent citizens' groups opened their own private libraries for children in the 1970s and 1980s (Nakamura, [2012](#) p. 11). They were completely voluntary activities to compensate for the deficiencies in public library services in their communities. Because only a few of them had any knowledge of library management, they often organised independent study groups on public libraries to help run their small libraries. Yuki took part in this kind of study group. Its members were interested in children's books and libraries. Almost all the members in this group ran private libraries and were very active. Before joining this circle, she had taken a university seminar which encouraged citizens' independent learning, where she gained the skills needed to engage in active discussions. After she had learned at the circle how to manage a small library, she decided to open one with her friends. She and other group members visited a library which was run by their mentor, and after that found a suitable place for their private library.

The beginning of Kana's involvement was her taking part in a library tour organised by the Friends of the Local Library. She met Mari and Yuki who were members of this group. She was immediately impressed by them and decided to join the program. She commented that she found they were like-minded with her and was very struck by their energetic nature.

Fumi's story was that a friend invited her to a storytelling circle just as she was beginning to think about what she could do for the next generation. She jumped straight in. She first learned storytelling and puppet play. They regularly visited elementary schools to give storytelling performances. Meanwhile, in 1997, she had the chance to visit public libraries in New Zealand: they had a major influence on her. Looking back, she believes that this event marked a turning point in her life. She then decided to set up an independent voluntary group, the Friends of the Local Library, to support her local library. It was established in January 1998.

Development of the activities

After the start of their independent involvement with libraries, how did they develop their activities? Mari, after taking on the management of a private library, had the idea of studying library science at a university. She started by attending an open session held there. A professor of library science who researched lifelong learning by citizens was interested in her involvement and recommended that she make a theoretical study of the relationship between citizens and local libraries. The downscaling of public library services was a major concern at that time, and the municipal government had announced the discontinuation of distribution of books to private libraries. Since the system of loaning out by the public library was the mainstay of her small private library, she joined a protest movement against this decision by the local authorities. However, she felt a slight sense of discomfort during the demonstrations. She explained this feeling as follows.

I was participating in activities with older members, but I felt slightly uncomfortable with how they went about them. It seemed as if they adopted a confrontational approach from the beginning. [...] It appeared that their involvement was premised on a denial of authority. What I mean is, they always maintained a confrontational attitude against the municipal authorities. This was the exact opposite attitude to my own.

She analysed her feelings about the older activists.

I found myself critical of their method of involvement. I respected them, though, because they were pioneers in the social movement that had served to uplift local libraries. All our present activities were based on the groundwork developed by these pioneers' efforts. But I thought there might be a better way.

At the same time, she had the chance to go to the U.S. and visit voluntary organisations associated with public libraries called *Friends of Libraries*. This led her to the alternative approach that she had been looking for. After returning to Japan, she told the members of her study group about her experiences overseas and suggested that they could be active in a different way. The response was mixed. While some members agreed with her, others disagreed. She, and those who agreed with her views established a new type of volunteer organisation that supports autonomous learning and maintains a friendly relationship with the local library. That was the original intent behind establishing Friends of the Local Library in 1995.

Planning self-directed learning programs was the most important activity engaged in by lifelong learners. After the establishment of a private library, Yuki planned a program at the library that she ran with other group members. She said she wanted to make a difference. They were fortunate in that specialists in social education advised them on how to design an educational program at the library. She described the program, looking back on the moment.

Needless to say, we planned out the entire content of the program. We didn't know exactly what we were doing. [...] we were all inexperienced and lacked the ability to fully accomplish what we wanted to achieve. Professionals in social education at the administration taught us what to do to be able to implement our program. We also received a grant of 100,000 yen from the local municipality to run this program.

Although she was keenly enthusiastic about the program, her lack of experience made her insecure about how it could be implemented. Educational programs conducted by ordinary citizens were uncommon back then. She commented that she and other group members felt great satisfaction after the program had concluded.

Yuki, Mari and group members conducted academic lectures in collaboration with a university. This project was realised in collaboration with a university professor who

acted as a mentor. The lecture series was held as a part of the professor's course on informal education. Virtually all the attendees were university students. Yuki commented that the professor probably intended to stimulate the students. Students acquired a better understanding of the actual state of informal education conducted by ordinary citizens through open lectures. While some members were accustomed to public speaking, this was Yuki's first experience. She recalled that she had repeatedly practiced her lecture for the course. Concerning academic lectures in collaboration with a university, she explained, '*It was a big challenge. [...] We were ordinary citizens. [...] It was very difficult for us to express what we wanted to say. But I think it created a sense of camaraderie between us*'.

In lifelong learning based in libraries, reading circles are usually in a crucial position. Yuki and Mari had a close relationship as founders of the Friends of the Local Library. When the organisation was first established, one of its key programs was a group reading circle that met every two months. They always chose library-themed materials; never fiction. The only exception was a novel centring on a library. Anyone who wanted to join the circle was welcome and people outside the group also took part in it. Word of mouth and newsletters were the main forms of publicity. Fumi also organised a prominent circle. Members read a book on the law that forms the theoretical foundation of the establishment of public libraries to understand the *raison d'être* of libraries.

When Fumi began to study libraries, she thought that she had better study the *Basic Act on Education* to learn about them, since the library is a social educational institution (Japan Statutes, [2006](#)). But in order to understand the *Basic Act on Education*, she also believed she had to study *The Constitution of Japan* first (Japan Statutes, [1946](#)). Fumi explained the launch of the reading circle using quite a serious book in the following way.

Actually, we started to study the Japanese Constitution immediately after the Friends was founded. We invited lots of different kinds of professionals, such as municipal administrators, researchers on libraries, and public librarians, to give lectures. We really studied the basic foundation of libraries from scratch.

Through learning about related laws, she realised she had gained an understanding of the fundamental issues surrounding public libraries. She studied these issues dedicatedly, thinking them over from new perspectives. She said that after she had carefully studied the history of libraries both before and after World War II, she was able to easily understand the position of public libraries in Japanese society.

Publishing newsletters is an important way for autonomous groups to convey what they do to the outside world. Kana was fully engaged in editing the group's newsletters. This process was quite unique. They did not have a specific schedule for their editing sessions. They met regularly, three times a year to prepare and post newsletters to their supporters. Since the mailing job was a simple task, while doing it they talked about

what to include in the next issue of the newsletter. These discussions comprised their editorial meetings. They rarely set aside a specific time for them.

Kana explained, *'We're all optimists. We always think we can work things out. [...] We're pretty flexible and don't have rules that dictate our involvement in a fixed way'*.

Meanwhile, they have a way of compensating for their lack of rigour. For instance, Kana said that, as the editor, she always keeps an eye out for useful information for possible inclusion in the newsletter; and after each of their events, she immediately asks the person most concerned to write an article about it.

In addition to their regular activities, interviewees engaged in a wide range of self-directed types of learning. They voluntarily visited a lot of neighbourhood libraries and participated in library conferences. Some members attended courses at universities. Since they never received external funding for their learning, they funded it themselves.

Relationships with the local library and municipal government

Although most study groups related to public libraries were spin-offs from past social movements, the civic groups in this paper had a quite different character from these organisations. They were independent organisations for lifelong learning, and their purpose was to foster the individual development of their members through library programs. When political problems occurred at local libraries, they tended to get drawn in, in spite of socio-political involvement not being their purpose. Municipal administrators, however, always regarded them as a pressure group. One member confessed that she felt that the municipal administrators did not really understand their aims.

When I established our group, I approached the chief librarian to explain our plans. He said to me, 'You're a pressure group, aren't you?' I didn't even know what a pressure group was!

Because the local library was the base for their activities, the members maintained a close relationship with it. Some of the interviewees took part in formal meetings there as citizens' representatives. Formal and informal discussion and collaboration with the local library were essential for the development of their activities. On the other hand, some members had strong and fixed attitudes toward municipal government officials. Some thought that maintaining a distance from administrative organisations was important for the stable development of an autonomous civic group. One member explained this, saying, *'citizens and librarians share a common purpose. The goal is the advancement of public libraries. However, if we all play on the same field, it becomes difficult to draw a line between the two sides. If this were to happen, it would be hard for us to take a critical stance towards the administrative authorities. I have learned this from past experience'*. This is why they wanted their group to be independent from librarians on the administrative side.

Kana also mentioned the relationship with the public administration. She said, *'in general, it seems to be difficult for public administration bodies and volunteer or NPO groups to trust and respect each other [...] But I had worked with civil servants and knew that there are a lot of competent staff who can look at things from the citizens' standpoint'*. Her experience had led her to believe that she could work together with them from the very beginning. In the past, there has been a conceptual separation and hostile relationships between public administration bodies and volunteer/NPO groups. However, group members have been careful to maintain a cordial relationship with the public administration. Kana understands that these relationships are largely owing to the efforts of older members. She agreed with this way of thinking: *'We have never engaged in so-called "opposition movement" or "lobbying". Instead, while we do all that is possible by ourselves, we always ask librarians what they can do'*.

To use the library as a base for their activities means that what they do is always under negotiation with the local library and local government. In the past, the relationship between citizens' groups and the public administration has often involved deep-rooted conflict. However, the interviewees in this study have critically overcome this type of confrontational relationship.

Human relations within the group

Relationships with group members have had a profound effect on the interviewees' activities. Their answers to questions about other group members reveal their unique sense of camaraderie. For example, Mari reminisced that, in the earliest period, they met naturally, without having a clear purpose, and had no particular goals for their involvement. However, since their first encounter, they have maintained a friendship lasting thirty years.

Mari described her relationships with her other group members as follows.

I think that the principal benefit is that I've been able to meet members who were seriously focused on the same aims as me. I realised that I couldn't have done what I did had I not met these people. [...] When I propose a new idea, somebody always responds encouragingly, like "That's great!" That's why I'm always moving on to some new project.

Mari said she and other group members have always engaged in honest debate, but they have never quarrelled. Of course, they have had conflicts of opinion. She said, *'There's always the risk that our relationship of trust might be broken by disagreement. Even now, I sometimes experience an awkward atmosphere'*. However, these conflicts have never resulted in permanent damage. She thinks that most of the members are quite mature. She said that placing a high value on libraries gives them a common bond. All the members have the strong conviction that their involvement would not have come into existence without libraries. That was the source of the group's unity.

Yuki described the relationship between members, saying '*You need a sense of the right interpersonal distance for this kind of group activity*'. She also commented that it allows them to maintain their relationships over a long period. The different group members' children are in the same generation, but they do not share much information about them. Yuki believes that the group's style, which favours personal autonomy, was established by Mari, the leader of the group. Yuki admires Mari's positive attitude towards an independent learning style. Kana, a younger member, concluded that the group's basic character comes from Mari and Yuki, the group's founders.

One interviewee commented '*Age doesn't really matter in our group. For me, senior members are just group members. Our relationship reminds me of that with some of my classmates from high school*'. She explained that while she always respected them, she did not feel a sense of hierarchical distance. They do not relate at all in terms of 'seniors and juniors': they avoid this conventional pattern. The relationship between members is quite unique. Although they spend a lot of time on their activities, and their friendships have matured over the years, the relationships have remained, deliberately, quite practical. The group members consciously and/or unconsciously have kept their relationships business-like, without much sharing of their personal lives.

Results and analytical perspectives

Three concepts such as 1) recognition of public libraries as a place for self-directed learning and citizen empowerment; 2) relationships with other group members; and 3) affiliations with public libraries were used as research questions for this study. The interviewees' discourse provided the explanatory evidence from which these concepts are formed.

Public libraries as a place for autonomous learning and citizen empowerment

When the interviewees first engaged in self-directed learning initiatives, there were a lot of options available as learning themes, such as environmental problems, social welfare problems, and civic problems. Many independent study groups were established for each of these areas and other topics. The interviewees therefore faced a wide choice of learning themes. Ultimately, they chose public libraries as their subject. Why did they choose libraries for targeted activities? Were their choices inevitable? Mari's university major, English literature, influenced her choice: she was fascinated by the world of children's literature. At the same time, she was engaged in running a small private library for children. She said that she was inevitably drawn to literature and libraries as her sphere of activity.

Mari has planned a wide variety of programs related to children's books. She explained her choice of libraries as her target of involvement as follows.

My activities closely depend on libraries. For example, we need to borrow books for reading aloud to children. Luckily for us, our library has a rich collection of children's books. We also borrow books for various exhibitions and talks on books. For exhibitions on specific countries, we collect a lot of minor books and make a list according to the representation by individual countries. In this case, we are totally dependent on the library collection. It's a fact that our activities can't proceed without libraries. [...] I think you simply can't do without public libraries if you're trying to enhance your knowledge about something, whatever it is. In general, public libraries are thought of as places for entertainment books, but actually they are a rich mine of learning materials.

Mari added that group members also utilise the local library's collection a great deal. She explained, '*without public libraries, we simply couldn't hold our programs. Librarians also support our programs. They are a great help to us*'. Kana regards the potential of libraries as enormous. She explained, '*Libraries give everyone a chance to find things out for themselves rather than having information simply handed to them. I think books have their own power and that they boost the empowerment of the individual*'. She believes that libraries foster self-directed learning.

The reason that libraries are chosen as an area for self-directed learning can also be explained in the light of social factors that are closely linked to the historical circumstances of Japanese public libraries. The public library system in Japan was developed after intense lobbying by citizens, starting in the 1960s. The rise of the citizens' library reform movement was a result of the poor state of public libraries at the time. The demand for library reform was directly connected to activists' hopes for access to lifelong learning. As proof of this, after the establishment of public libraries, citizens who participated in social movements continued to commit to and support local libraries. Most groups had reading circles, and their members learned that libraries offered opportunities for self-directed learning and a foundation for ordinary citizens' *right to educate themselves*. This tradition still remains in organisations involved in library activities, and the interviewees' involvement can be seen as being rooted in this history.

Relationships with other group members

The connection between members is unique and strongly influenced by their awareness of the importance of personal autonomy. According to Mari's statement, if there are different opinions, they always exchange views with an open mind. An individual who has a dissenting view does not hesitate to express it. At the same time, members always try to present their ideas tactfully. In consequence, they appreciate and respect one another's opinions. Mari concludes that mutual understanding and support is fundamental to develop and crystallise the ideas that are proposed.

Yuki made a similar remark to that of Mari.

We've all tried to maintain a respectful relationship. Since each member was a homemaker, we tried to the best of our ability within the limits of our home environments. And we recognise that in each other. Our relationship is based on mutual respect. I think it is difficult to maintain this kind of relationship, so I'm deeply thankful for having met these people.

Yuki explained her close connection with other group members, but emphasised that their relationship centres on their public personas, without extending into the private sphere. She said that they have never become too involved in each other's private lives. She explained this as follows.

We are in a very close relationship. But at the same time, we keep a distance. How can I explain this? [...] This might sound odd, but actually, we still don't talk like friends. We sometimes have a chat over a cup of tea though. [...] I think we're careful about not intruding. [...] I think that knowing too much about the personal lives of members might 'muddy the waters' and negatively affect our activities.

Although they work together all day long when they have tasks to accomplish, they rarely meet up outside of work. They do not have a cup of tea or a meal together outside of working hours. Kana said that their interactions are strictly limited to library programs. Although the ways in which they commit to libraries vary according to the individual, their connection is based entirely on sharing thoughts and values about books and libraries. She stated that since they rarely talk about their families, they do not know anything about each other's private or family lives. She explained that library programs lie at the heart of their relationship and that's all.

This rather stoic relationship between members has allowed them to concentrate on learning programs. Not engaging in personal relationships is likely to have a beneficial influence on their learning activities. This maintains the creative tension within the group, meaning that the basis of involvement has always been very stable. Interestingly, this kind of relationship formed implicitly in the group from the very beginning and appears to have strengthened its focus on learning. They have concentrated on lifelong learning by keeping somewhat formal relations. Although they are quite close, they successfully maintain a quasi-public relationship by ignoring private matters.

The reciprocal structure of citizens' lifelong learning and public libraries

All the interviewees had high social awareness and a keen interest in social change. For them, the focus of their wish for social change is the local library, and their orientation is directly connected to how to involve themselves with local libraries. Mari explained their relationship with the local library in the following way.

We don't just support the local library. [...] We also explore how to use the library through our involvement. We plan programs for the library and explore ways of utilising it as a place for lifelong learning.

Her remark shows that she has thought about, with group members, how to make the best use of the library for lifelong learning. In fact, their group has been developing workshops for local citizens on how to utilise libraries. These workshops have contributed to increased numbers of skilled users of the library and changes in participants' understanding of the library. They are making full use of the library, while attempting to maximise the services it provides.

Attempts to change and improve the library were not limited to library services. One interviewee took on the informal education policy of the municipal government, presenting a critique of the authorities. Fumi described her concerns about lifelong learning policy in the following way.

Unfortunately, the understanding of the significance of lifelong learning on the part of municipal government has begun to weaken. It seems to me that the people who determine the policy of the informal education plan don't think deeply about the philosophy of lifelong learning.

She worried that volunteer groups were being regarded as cheap working staff. Another concern was promoting the privatisation of lifelong learning programs without careful consideration. She suggested a suitable informal education policy based on her own experience.

If municipal government regards the autonomous involvement of local residents as an important issue, they should take note of lifelong learning by local residents and take measures to foster it. [...] For example, in my own case, I started out by simply joining a storytelling circle, but my initial interest gradually developed into much more extensive learning about social education.

These critical discourses were rooted in lifelong learning in the library. Through self-directed learning, her opinion on social education has crystallised into a critical viewpoint.

Practice and theory established by interviewees through their independent involvement shows a complex relationship between citizens as lifelong learners and public libraries. For the interviewees, involvement with libraries meant participating in municipal processes, and an informal negotiating relationship consisting of a mixture of reciprocal help, collaboration and conflict was established between them.

Conclusion

By focusing on the interviewees' personal histories, this study offered some insights into the function of public libraries as places for fostering the empowerment of study group members. The interviewees who appeared in this study spoke about their own potential to empower themselves by using public libraries: for them, public libraries were tools for self-realisation and places where they could satisfy their intellectual needs. They redefined their positions through communication with others and worked on improving their own social awareness. Some of the remarks expressed in the interviews show that the interviewees gained the skill of self-reflection on their self-directed learning by looking objectively at their involvement. It can be concluded that lifelong learning using public libraries boosted both their social and civic awareness. Although their activities were basically independent of public authorities, it does not mean that they were detached from the public sphere. They actively participated in public discussions with stakeholders about public libraries and contributed to advocating public libraries. Their activities were strengthened and enriched by linking the private and public spheres.

The interview data provided evidential information on the actual state of lifelong learning and citizens' involvement with local libraries. The results of lifelong learning were brought about by continued long-term activity and a keen awareness of the benefits of self-directed learning. The key factors contributing to the successful results of their lifelong learning could be based on their educational background. They are all university graduates and possess the basic ability to learn by themselves. In addition, all of them are members of the Friends of Libraries, and, being actively involved with local libraries, they created their learning environment as ordinary citizens. As a result, their self-directed learning directly connected to supporting other citizens' lifelong learning in public libraries.

Citizens' autonomous non-profit-making learning activities based on local libraries are in clear opposition to neoliberalism, which subverts the public sphere by reducing everything to its monetary value. The results of this study demonstrate the public value of the library as a cultural tool for self-directed learning and civic engagement and suggest possibilities for confronting neoliberalism, which is corroding non-profit cultural values. This study has shown that a public library is a cultural device that fosters lifelong learners while embodying the public values of libraries for citizen empowerment and civic engagement.

In this study the interviewees described the complex interrelationship between citizens as lifelong learners and public libraries. An informal negotiating relationship consisting of reciprocal assistance, collaboration and conflict was found between them. This multi-layered negotiation with municipal authorities, including libraries, typifies citizens' participation in municipal processes and in building a democratic society. Further research needs to be conducted on the cultural politics of stakeholders related to citizens' lifelong learning to reveal the broader picture of lifelong learning in public libraries.

Pseudonyms are used to protect the research participants' privacy and confidentiality.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to anonymous reviewers who provided insightful comments. This work was supported by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology in Japan (Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research No. 24500290).

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How to cite this paper

Yoshida, Y (2021). Public libraries as places for self-directed lifelong learning: narratives of empowerment. *Information Research*, 26(1), paper 888. Retrieved from <http://InformationR.net/ir/26-1/paper888.html> (Archived by the Internet Archive at <https://bit.ly/30yRJsL>) <https://doi.org/10.47989/irpaper888>

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