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**Stories Not Statistics: A Qualitative Narrative Exploration  
of the Value of Public Libraries in the United Kingdom**

**Sam Dodd and David Bawden**

**Abstract**

This study investigates the value of the public library service, and library buildings in particular, in qualitative terms, with a focus on how the public library can address issues of loneliness and belonging. A qualitative narrative approach is taken, to develop 'library stories' and provide a deeper understanding which complements quantitative studies and library statistics. A three-stage research approach is taken: an initial literature analysis to identify issues and themes, leads to a directed content analysis of some of this material to generate micro-narratives, which are complemented by an evocative autoethnography. Interrelated connections emerge concerning where our bodies belong, and vulnerable and marginalised users; and new types of knowledges are identified. This is a novel combination of methods for library/information research, with the potential to highlight in new ways the value of library services and buildings. The study deals with UK public libraries between 2000 and 2021.

**Introduction**

This paper reports a study of narrative inquiry to reveal how public libraries are valued in qualitative terms, through themes of loneliness and belonging. It is drawn from a Masters dissertation available in the Humanities Commons repository (Anon, 2021).

Public libraries in the United Kingdom have been closing at an average rate of 77 per year since the introduction of austerity in 2010, and latterly due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Flood 2019; 2020). As a statutory service that is free at the point of use and thus not

subjected to the same profit-driven ideals that most other public services are under neoliberal agendas, difficulties arise when measuring value, requiring alternative methods than those grounded in competitive market values. As Lauersen (2020) puts it: “Library statistics are important, but lending numbers, downloads and foot traffic says something about the *use* of libraries but not really much about the *value* and *impact* that libraries bring to communities. You cannot see the role libraries play in fighting inequality, polarisation, and loneliness from a spreadsheet”.

This study examines the idea that not only are we measuring value with tools inadequate for the purpose, but also that there may be a profound social value in having a community building that provides information, connection to others, essential resources, and other crucial public and civic services, all for free, to all citizens regardless of background or other identity determinant. A physical library building is a space that practices and represents inclusion and belonging for everybody (Audunson et al. 2019, Hider et al. 2022). As society increases its dependence on digital solutions and e-governance for civic participation, retaining such physical spaces becomes even more urgent, so that we may avoid marginalising and excluding those already underserved by society, politics, and civic systems. In particular, library spaces may help to alleviate loneliness and social isolation, and to increase a sense of belonging; see, for example, CIPFA (2020), Hider et al. (2022) and Dalmer and Griffin (2022).

This study seeks to examine these issues through qualitative research, which enables the richness of personal experience to be presented as a complement to quantitative data. In particular, it uses narratives: drawing out stories which illustrate and evidence this role of the library, through content analysis, and through autoethnography. Autoethnography is still a relatively new research method in the library and information sciences, its combination with

content analysis even less common, in a discipline where qualitative research has been, and remains, in the minority (Ford 2020). They are methods that are gaining in popularity, however; see for example, Deitering, Schroeder and Stoddart (2017), Bronstein (2019), and Fourie (2021A). More detailed discussion is given in the methods section.

The study concentrates on developments in public libraries in the United Kingdom from 2000-2021, since this period covers the emergence of the current UK public library scene, with the completion of the 'People's Network' digital provision, the cuts and closures due to austerity following the financial crisis of 2008, and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. It relies on a selection of English-language resources. This close focus on a specific context allows a detailed and deep analysis.

## **Background**

A selective literature review was carried out, to establish the background to the study, and also to identify particularly apposite items for the thematic analysis. Materials were identified by searches of three databases - Library and Information Science Abstracts [LISA], Library and Information Science and Technology Abstracts [LISTA], and Web of Knowledge - supplemented by reference and citation following, and by examination of UK professional and government bodies. The focus is on the UK library landscape, in order to maintain a constant context for the detailed qualitative analysis. However, the general idea of the public library and its physical buildings, as a shared community space, combatting loneliness and enhancing a sense of belonging, are recognised internationally: it is known that use of libraries and library space, and perceptions of library purpose and value by librarians and patrons, differs markedly – even between countries that might be thought of as

similar (Vakkari et al. 2016; Johnson et al. 2022). Some themes and ideas from international literature are identified and applied to analysis of UK documents, in the literature review.

The review identified items dealing with the role of the public library in reducing loneliness and enhancing feelings of belonging to a community, with particular emphasis on the role of the physical library building. Overall, the review revealed a consistent view that public libraries reduce loneliness and increase feelings of belonging, and that the public library as an institution that anchors a community and bridges social and other divides. These factors have been recognised more fully in light of the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Counter narratives, finding the public library unwelcoming or failing to reduce loneliness, were difficult to find – although there is a wealth of newspaper articles and think-pieces on the subject of their necessity at all in today's smart-led sociocultural landscape.

The phrase 'loneliness and social isolation' encapsulates a complex set of objective and subjective social and emotional factors, which can have severe effects on health and well-being (Latikka et al. 2021). Numerous studies showed that people across all demographic groups report feeling less lonely and more connected as a direct result of their public libraries and the in-person services and events they offer, the effect being most marked in populations suffering isolation, vulnerability and deprivation (CIPFA 2020; Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2021; Libraries Connected 2020; Paul Hamlyn Foundation 2007; Libraries Deliver 2018; Moore Kingston Smith 2019, Libraries Week 2021A; Libraries Week 2021B). Notably, the alleviation of loneliness resulting from engagement with activities run in library buildings continued even after that engagement ceased (Moore Kingston Smith 2019). The literature shows a raised awareness of the role of the public library in combatting loneliness during and since the Covid pandemic (Hider et al. 2022; Ruthen, Robinson and McMenemy 2022).

In terms of belonging, libraries are seen to have a clear role in community building. Cavanagh (2015) theorises that “the activity of [library] membership is an ongoing process of intentional association with a collective where the shared purpose is known ... Belonging is an outcome of membership in that collective action. From the sociologist's perspective, when an individual intentionally joins a collective action, becoming another member of [it], their membership creates a relationship of structural belonging to the social group.” Public libraries clearly have a role in anchoring people in their communities and providing a sense of place and belonging, for all groups, but especially socially excluded, marginalised, and disadvantaged ones (Paul Hamlyn Foundation 2007; Libraries Deliver 2018; Moore Kingston Smith 2019; Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2021). There is evidence that they help in forming stronger, more resilient communities, lessening loneliness and increasing belonging as a result (Paul Hamlyn Foundation 2007; Libraries Deliver 2018; Moore Kingston Smith 2019, Libraries Week 2021A; Libraries Week 2021B).

The building itself is important. The literature provides evidence that the presence of the physical library building, a shared community space, improves a person's sense of belonging to their local community (Paul Hamlyn Foundation 2007; CILIP 2016; Libraries Deliver 2018) and are considered to be trusted, safe, neutral public places free from any commercialised or political agenda (CILIP 2016; Libraries Deliver 2018; Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2021). The presence of a public library building with trained staff lessens loneliness in communities and fosters feelings of belonging, and the success of expanded home and digital library offerings during Covid lockdowns should not be used as justifications for building closures (Libraries Connected 2020). All the reports focusing on libraries in lockdown broadly agreed that public library buildings will be essential for recovery from the pandemic because they provide a space for interaction, access

to civic services, connection in all its forms, skills sharing, and improved health outcomes. All these are elements that contribute to easing loneliness, and fostering togetherness, collaboration and belonging between individuals across demographics within communities. Concerns were raised across the sources over ongoing sustained funding to enable physical library buildings to survive. The experience of the Covid pandemic shows that expanded digital provision, though welcome, is no substitute for the physical building and its services (Ruthven, Robinson and McMenemy 2022; Dalmer and Mitrovica 2022).

Although the literature review focused on the UK situation, the same situation is noted in other countries: for example, a study found 'social connections' (lonely, need to make friends, etc.) to be the highest unmet psychosocial need in a survey of US public library patrons (Wahler, Rortvedt and Saecker 2022); socialising and meeting friends was among the top ten activities undertaken in the library in an Australian study (Hider et al. 2020); and providing a place to meet people and make friends was among the top five benefits of the public library identified in a Canadian study (Shepherd, Petrillo and Wilson 2020).

The review clearly establishes the importance of the public library service, and its buildings, for countering loneliness and supporting community belonging. A selection of material identified in the review was then used in the detailed qualitative analysis which follows.

## **Methods**

This study took a qualitative narrative approach, an increasingly popular qualitative method across a range of social sciences (Barkhuizen and Consoli 2021; Loseke 2022).

Recognised as a distinct approach around the start of the millennium, narrative inquiry is "a



form of qualitative research that takes story as either its raw data or its product" and is typically focused on a small set of cases (Bleakley 2005, 534). As Bruce et al (2016) suggest, "the narrative turn is a term used primarily in literary studies, social, and human sciences and expresses a shift toward legitimising peoples' stories as important sources of empirical knowledge."

The use of narrative enquiry in LIS research is not new. Brophy (2008) was the first to argue explicitly for the use of narrative approaches as not easy to apply, but effective in communicating the value of libraries; a viewpoint echoed more recently by Calvert and Goulding (2015). The use of such methods in the library information context have been reviewed by Ford (2020) and by Frandsen, Sørensen, and Fladmose (2021). The former notes that narrative research in LIS "is not fully established" but argues its value as a phenomenological lens through which to view and theorise on human experience, although "researchers in LIS – a human focused profession – have infrequently used it." The latter give a systematic review "exploring narratives and stories for understanding and evaluating the library's worth" and conclude that this is a growing and promising approach for capturing rich evidence of the value of libraries, and can support a "great variety ... inexhaustible" of research methods. Rather than judging value from traditional forms of narrative, such as the fixed structures with beginnings, middle and ends, to really understand a community and what it needs we should move into "incoherent, fragmented, non-linear, polyphonic and tension-filled 'living stories'". These authors also predict that one of the trends in any future attempts to prove the value of public libraries will be collecting and presenting stories of change to use as evidence in impact evaluations.

There were two stages to the narrative research in this study. First, a content analysis of relevant documents was carried out, producing vignettes which gave short ‘micro-narratives’, or ‘narrative data’ (Barkhuizen and Consoli 2021) accounts of issues of loneliness and belonging in relation to the public library. Then an autoethnographic narrative by one of the authors [SD] complemented this, giving a more detailed account of the issue. This is in accordance with the view that in narrative research the researcher may include views from their own life along with those from other sources (Creswell and Creswell 2018). Both narrative enquiry and autoethnography can focus on the articulations and needs of vulnerable and socially excluded users, on what is being communicated from the margins, and provide an opportunity to “embrace vulnerability with a purpose” (Fourie 2021B, 7).

We may note that narrative and ethnographic methods are generally regarded as distinct, being two of three (Bhattacharya 2017) or five (Creswell and Creswell 2018; Creswell and Poth 2018) qualitative research approaches. In this case, however, the autoethnographic approach is, by definition, narrative. This combination of narrative enquiry based on content analysis with autoethnography is novel in studies of library/information contexts.

Ethical approval was given by the relevant institutional ethics committee. There are distinct ethical issues in autoethnographic research, in particular the privacy of persons who may be mentioned in the writing, the openness and vulnerability of the writer, and the need for truthfulness and the full explanation of context (Meyer and Fourie 2021). These were fully considered in this research.

### ***Content Analysis***

The content analysis of a subset of documents identified in the literature review was carried out, as noted above, to enable the construction of micro-narratives on the topics at issue. Items were chosen for analysis if they contained material relevant to issues of loneliness and belonging in the public library context, and were expressing some form of personal narrative. Twelve items met these criteria. They include reviews, case studies, and academic papers, plus reports of public library services, local government and/or community partners, and/or national library advocacy organisations and other associated bodies, about the uses and users of public libraries, and centred the voices and testimonies of users and staff members. This relatively small number of diverse documents is appropriate for detailed qualitative analysis. (Creswell and Cresswell 2018, 186).

Thematic content analysis, specifically ‘directed’ content analysis, was chosen as a method of qualitative data exploration, appropriate to a study validating and extending the existing body of knowledge and understanding about the relation of the public library to issues of belonging and loneliness. Directed content analysis, as opposed to summative or conventional content analysis, starts with guidance for initial codes from theory or from other research findings, rather being derived from the analysed text, and is hence a deductive approach (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Assarroudi et al. 2018). Counting instances and occurrences of words and phrases (quantitative) informs meaning (qualitative) and alternative and euphemistic phrases, words and sentences are identified and utilised, to extend a theory (directed). This may be contrasted with the use of content analysis of interview narratives to study the information behaviour of migrant workers, which used an inductive-deductive approach, deriving codes from the texts being analysed (Bronstein 2019). The codes in the present study were derived from the background literature analysis, rather than being limited to the 12 items used for the analysis – the wider initial set of literature to inform code

generation providing a broader picture. Codes in this first cycle were derived by one researcher, and checked by the second (Williamson, Given and Scifleet 2018).

There are biases inherent in this method of content analysis which must be acknowledged. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) state: “researchers might be likely to find evidence that is supportive rather than non-supportive of a theory.” Because the theory and positioning of this study is already made clear, potential biases are able to be identified and discussed.

NVivo 12 software was utilised for the data analysis. The twelve documents (four case studies, six reports, and two journal articles) from the literature review were coded into fifty NVivo ‘nodes’ (referred to as codes henceforth), reduced to forty-five after two codes were merged with others, and three further codes that attracted less than five instances each were uncoded and deleted. The latter choice, to uncode rather than merge, was taken as a) these codes bore no real impact on the study overall and were not notably relevant to the scope, and b) all instances of these references were also coded elsewhere, so their content and meaning was not lost. Coding was carried out by one researcher and checked by a second.

Coding was subject to some degree of researcher bias as judgement had to be made in hundreds of instances as to where a word, sentence or paragraph belonged in the coding structure. Synonyms, stemmed words, specialisations and generalisations were included. For example, for the code ‘loneliness’, words, sentences and paragraphs also assigned to that code included: ‘lonely’, ‘alone’, and ‘no support network.’ ‘Lives/living alone’ was not coded to ‘loneliness’ as a default, as that would infer that all people who live alone are lonely, though in instances where the context confirmed that living alone did indeed increase

loneliness, it was coded as such. 'Isolated' had its own code, as did 'social inclusion'. Where appropriate and relevant, instances were coded to one or both of these alongside loneliness.

Inferences were also coded according to the judgement of the researchers. For example: "...often being the only person they would speak to" (Libraries Connected, 2020, p.30) was coded to 'loneliness', 'isolation', 'local resident or library user' and 'belonging'. It was also coded to 'library staff' due to its context – the 'only person they would speak to' referred to the staff member, underscoring the importance not just of the library building but the staff that run it too – the human, personal element of the public library service. Accordingly, some testimonies used in the analysis of narratives are official sources and staff statements, to add weight and context to the traditional user narratives we analyse.

### ***Autoethnography***

Autoethnography is a relatively new and under-used tool in the field of LIS, a 2021 review of autoethnography in library and information science listing only 42 items (Fourie 2021C). It can provide a richness not found through the more traditional 'researched - researcher' ethnographic dichotomies, and its use, like that of other qualitative methods, is increasing.

Autoethnography is a self-reflective approach to research that seeks to describe and analyse the researcher's own personal experience in some context, connecting their story to wider issues, and hence to provide an understanding of that context complementary to that obtainable from other, and more objective, research approaches (Fourie 2021B; Poulos 2021; Hughes and Pennington 2017). It is located with autophenomenography and autohermeneutics, as 'automethodologies'; techniques for examining and making sense of an

individual's lived experience (Gorichanaz 2017). Fourie (2021B, 4) asserts that “self-focussed critical reflection and self-evaluation are at the centre of autoethnographic research. The writer is both the researcher and the research participant. Personal thoughts and actions need to be visible, and the writing should be open to investigation by others.” Hughes and Pennington (2017, 687) agree: “Autoethnography is [where] the researcher takes an active, scientific, and systematic view of personal experience in relation to cultural groups identified by the researcher as similar to the self.” Relatedly, Fourie (2021B, 3) articulates that autoethnography is undertaken “with a purpose – to reveal social and cultural challenges, injustice and imbalances that need to be addressed.”

The method has not been without its critics; “met with extensive scepticism, and sometimes very harsh criticism” (Fourie 2021B, 10). It has not always been regarded as academically credible, as exemplified by the problems of initially getting autoethnographic studies published in LIS journals (Schroeder 2017). The question of whether autoethnography can be a rigorous research method has also been raised. We attempt to address this by following Gorichanaz' (2021) prescription to allow the method to move us forward by ensuring that it is focused on the central themes of the study: loneliness and belonging, and public libraries. Nonetheless its use in a variety of LIS areas is expanding, as exemplified by the contributors to the collections edited by Fourie (2021A) and Deitering, Schroeder and Stoddard (2017), by recent examples of applications to studies of health information seeking (Ngula, 2022), and of fan-fiction self-publishing (Price 2022).

## **Results**

### ***Content analysis***

The forty-five original codes were assigned to and split across ten parent themes, transforming them all into child codes. The full list of original codes (before aggregation with their parents) can be found as Appendix C in Anon (2021). The ten themes that were devised from the codes follow as Table 1. (Note that ‘Demographics and Identity Markers’ includes demographic factors other than age, e.g. race, disability, income. Age factors are coded as ‘Age Groups’).

Table 1

<b>Theme (in alphabetical order)</b>	<b>No. of child codes</b>	<b>Total no. of references aggregated across all documents &amp; child codes</b>
Age Groups	2	41
Belonging & Loneliness	8	611
Demographic & Identity Markers	6	136
Feeling & Emotions	3	52
Health & Wellbeing	4	153
Impact	2	113
Information Engagement / Accessibility	5	156
Library Services	6	172
Phenomena	5	182
Stakeholders	4	212

From this coding data, three initial main findings were identified. Firstly, the ‘Belonging & Loneliness’ theme parented eight child codes and was by far the highest scoring in terms of aggregated references across all parent themes, gathering 611 total (the next theme down gathering 212). The child codes under this theme were: belonging // communication and talking // community // connection // isolation // library reduces loneliness // loneliness // social inclusion. Under the code Phenomena were child codes: change // economy or employment // library closures // reaching users // sense-making and place-making. From these codes, ‘belonging’ and ‘loneliness’ gathered the third and fourth highest number of references across the entire project of 45 codes, at 91 each.

Secondly, of the ten parent themes, only four occurred in all 12 documents:

- Belonging & Loneliness with eight child codes and 611 aggregated references
- Stakeholders with four child codes and 212 aggregated references
- Phenomena with five child codes and 182 aggregated references
- Library Services with six child codes and 172 aggregated references

Thirdly, the relation between the narrative themes of belonging and loneliness and other themes can be examined. Coding queries were performed on the two relevant child codes: 'belonging' and 'loneliness' comparing them with the highest scoring child code from each of the ten parent themes (including their own parent theme, Belonging & Loneliness), to find the number of co-occurrences (where a section of text was coded either to Belonging or Loneliness, and also the other child code it is being compared to). See Table 2:

Table 2

<b>Parent Theme</b>	<b>Highest Scoring Child Code</b>	<b>Co-Occurrences with:</b>
Age Groups >	Older People = 22 references	Belonging = 2 Loneliness = 7
Belonging & Loneliness >	Community = 102 references	Belonging = 36 Loneliness = 29
Demographic & Identity Markers >	Vulnerable or Marginalised = 47 references	Belonging = 12 Loneliness = 15
Feelings & Emotions >	Happiness, Pride, Confidence = 35 references	Belonging = 14 Loneliness = 9
Health & Wellbeing >	Health and Wellbeing = 106 references	Belonging = 26 Loneliness = 32
Impact >	Positive Impact = 74 references	Belonging = 27 Loneliness = 22
Information Engagement & Accessibility >	Digital Exclusion, Divide = 49 references	Belonging = 16 Loneliness = 10
Library Services >	New Library Offers = 51 references	Belonging = 7 Loneliness = 6
Phenomena >	Reaching Users = 98 references	Belonging = 35 Loneliness = 28
Stakeholders >	Library Staff = 80 references	Belonging = 12 Loneliness = 11



A vignette approach allows the main narrative threads running through the documents attached to these twelve codes to be examined, to find the common stories these codes are capturing. An NVivo query was run to bring together both main codes of Belonging and Loneliness as an 'All' (not 'Any') search parameter, then adding each of the top ten child codes above (again as 'All'), as individual searches.

Below is a vignette-style micro-narrative collection of belonging and loneliness related quotes pulled from each of these ten searches.

*As one of the UK's most widely used and trusted public services, public libraries have a powerful role to play in addressing some of our most challenging social issues, such as poverty, loneliness and social isolation, and social mobility" (CILIP 2018, 20)*

*"Vulnerable people who are digitally and socially excluded need to develop and improve their skills to access critical services like accessing health services, council services or shopping online to do their groceries" (Libraries Week 2021a, 1)*

*"I feel alone and worthless, but whenever I come to the library the environment makes me feel good here, I can meet other people" ~ Library User (CIPFA 2020, 20)*

*"...it brings people together in the library. The gasps of awe and wonder are like music, and having such a positive experience brings people back again ... we are very proud of this project as we can see how positive an impact it can have ... It dovetails neatly with our strategic aims of supporting digital inclusion and participation, and supporting health and wellbeing" ~ Library Staff Member (Libraries Week 2021b, 2)*

*“Another issue related to [elderly people] ... in some degree of social isolation is that they can find it difficult to meet new people. Group members reported that regularly meeting with others in a relaxed, safe environment had helped to grow their social confidence...”*

*(Moore Kingston Smith 2019, 22)*

*“Public libraries are places for human interaction, neutral, safe spaces or ‘community hubs’ where people can meet others and pursue interests with other like-minded local residents, contributing to social cohesion. They also fulfil a role in placemaking...”*

*(Libraries Connected 2019, 9)*

In these micro-narratives, intertwined with ideas of belonging are experiences of ‘human interaction’, ‘emotional support’, ‘social cohesion’, ‘social support’, and ‘placemaking’. Likewise, intertwined with ideas of loneliness are experiences such as ‘isolated’, ‘digital exclusion’, ‘most in need’, and ‘vulnerable’. These are all expressions and embodied knowledges referenced within the micro-narratives. These expressions can be viewed as social values – or if we view them through a constructivist lens, as the value of the library – which is to say that each individual's narrated experience of life possesses inherent value in and of itself, without needing an external justifying measure.

One finding of note was that, although there was a code for the coding of ‘Information Literacy and Information Behaviour,’ a need that is usually considered one of the core purposes of a public library service, there were only eight instances of this code being used across just four of the 12 files. This was because in other cases where it could have been used, those particular instances fitted more appropriately into other codes instead,

as the information behaviour in question had an underlying need which was evident contextually. This reinforces the idea that, on many occasions, library users do not see their reasons for using a library in 'library/information terms', for borrowing books or seeking information *per se*, but rather to solve problems and to make sense of the world.

Another phenomenon that emerged when examining crossovers and co-occurrences of the keywords used in the content analysis was that many are interlinked and cannot easily be divided into categories. Even in instances where they do not appear together in the same sentence or even the same document, it is reasonable to suggest that connection is implicit if we reach into our lived experiences and knowledges to find our commonly held truths.

When used with other qualitative methods and lenses like autoethnography, connections can be made which are not possible with purely quantitative data analysis. Meaning may be drawn from these connections.

### ***Autoethnography: Theory & Rationale***

The autoethnographical element was carried out by one of the authors [SD] and is now reported in the first person. The style is that of the evocative autoethnography (Spinazola, Ellis and Bochner 2021), since it begins with, and remains centred on, the lived experience of its author.

This part of the research is an attempt to find out why my own experiences, when I position myself as 'the researched,' are interesting for this study and how they feed back into the narratives and stories I looked at earlier on while positioned as 'the researcher'. I align myself with Tamboukou, Andrews, and Squire at this point by agreeing that "narrative researchers are crucially a part of the data we collect; our presence, our very bodies, are

imprinted upon all that we do. It is left to us then to determine how we account for ourselves in the work that we do, to consider the impact of our own positioning and that of others – that is, those whose lives lie at the centre of our research – on our scholarship” (2013, 18). I also align myself with Grace and Sen (2013), who assert that while acknowledging the “graphy” and “auto,” they are mostly concerned with “ethnos” – thus, narrative inquiry should provide me with “a method of opening up the data and understanding the culture with which I interact on a daily basis.” Unlike Grace and Sen however, who differentiate between autobiography and autoethnography, I argue that autoethnography can involve autobiographical representations though is not limited to them, and if labelled and owned as such, this method can be an effective and interesting one for unearthing shared knowledges.

I cannot tell my story of why libraries are necessary – specifically in relation to marginalised and vulnerable groups – or to put it another way, groups more likely to experience higher levels of loneliness and feelings of unbelonging – without exposing my biases. I believe that in framing this research in terms of narrative I am able to see different layers of meaning and understand more about the values of many and varied individuals in, and on, the public library. This hopefully brings the research in line with the idea that there is no objective singular truth on the value of the public library, precisely because library users are not a homogenous group, and truth and meaning are different for each individual.

So, while autoethnography allows me to articulate my stories and knowledges, narrative inquiry is what allows me to analyse them, both on their own and in connection with the narratives of others.

Therefore, I lay out my own experience as a lifelong user of public libraries and my emotional connection to them, from the lived experience of having been embedded in the research setting for almost four decades and as an individual from, what mainstream research narratives would label, a marginalised and disadvantaged background. In doing so, I align myself consciously and deliberately with the narratives from the content analysis, acknowledging that I am a library user *before* I am a researcher, and suggesting that this is why autoethnography is therefore the best fit for this study.

There are numerous accounts, both in the literature and anecdotally, of when disparate power dynamics have been leveraged in ethnographical studies by the use of top-down academic authority over the subject or population that is being studied ‘from above,’ facilitated by the researcher absenting the ‘self’ from the research. This dynamic is characteristic of many systems I have experienced – the foster care system, the benefits system, the mental healthcare system, the chronic illness healthcare system – systems that I escaped to the public library from – and also in a number of workplaces I have inhabited. These are structures that function in ‘top down’, hierarchical manners: examples of ‘power over’ rather than ‘power with’. Coming from the background that I do, I cannot easily choose to emulate the same systems of power in my research as the ones that have oppressed me. Consequently, it does not feel possible to talk about the importance of replacing power-over structures with power-with versions unless I am prepared to embody these methods in my own work first.

This study was an attempt to facilitate ‘power with,’ manifesting as 1) the teller sharing power with the reader as an act of knowledge co-creation, and 2) the researcher

sharing power with the researched, *as* the researched, as an act of solidarity, relatability, and vulnerability.

As Butz and Besio (2009) phrase it, the objective here is to “destabilise ethnographic authority by writing in a way that emphasises the socially and politically constituted nature of knowledge claims” – in this context, attempting to unearth new knowledges in the pursuit of the defence of the public library. As Frandsen, Sørensen, and Fladmose (2021) emphasise, to really understand what a community needs, especially in relation to its public library system, we should move into listening to and elevating “living stories.” These narratives may be more common than we think – structured stories, while often satisfying in a literary sense and easier to analyse objectively, will often not represent the non-linear structures and thought processes that the everyday person experiences and embodies. Sense-making is just one method by which humans assimilate and develop coping strategies, and we sense-make through story-making and storytelling. The availability and accessibility of information as it relates to the self can facilitate these story-making, sense-making journeys – especially for marginalised, vulnerable, or disadvantaged groups, who may not have easy access to information at home and therefore use public libraries as a recognisable and navigable community anchor from which to partake in civic participation. I did not have access to information at home as a child, but I found it when I visited the library. As an adult, there were multiple periods of time in which I had no smartphone, no WiFi/data, or both, and the increasing move towards e-governance within urban settings in the UK meant I could not access civic services, welfare benefits or health referrals without London’s public libraries.

“There are no relations of power without resistance” (Foucault 1980). Radford (1992, 148) summarises Foucauldian thought as follows: “For Foucault, objectivity and truth are

sites of struggle among competing systems of discourse. What is scientific at any particular historical juncture is determined by which system is dominant and not which system is true.” To add to this notion of objectivity, Squire et al (2014, 54-55) claim that when we are theorising on power and narratives we must also accept that narratives are mobile, shifting across time and situation, and they implicate the researcher along with the researched including any potential biases and subjectivity, which in turn gives narrative work “a very particular relation to issues of power and resistance.” I think there are two ways to view this. One way is, if we understand the landscape we are on and work to deliberately shift the spaces and structures in which we have these conversations, changing the rules and individuals we use to moderate them, then we could mobilise marginal narratives in pursuit of a larger, collective goal – one that comprehends and re-presents new and refocused ideas of what constitutes value when discussing the future of the public library. The other way is, our narratives are undermined by the system in power precisely because they cannot be measured statistically or numerically, and therefore, they will continue to be discounted. Of course, if we work methodically towards the first, then the second becomes moot.

Without the ability to engage with information sources, it is difficult for us to situate ourselves accurately within both our civic and social environments, and those of the systems we are intertwined with or dependent on. When we cannot do this, we cannot resist where necessary, and when this happens, disempowerment occurs. It is my lived experience that this state of being leads to loneliness and feelings of unbelonging.

“We used to think that power was about either the creation or the control of things, that it was about the means of production of goods. That’s what Marx thought. It was not about the production of experiences or services. Then

society switched to a focus on power being expressed through the control of information. Once control of information is recognised as a source of power, then any powerful entity wants to control this information. Governments and empires all want to control information. What we're seeing today is the very beginning of another switch, from power over things, to power over information, to power about the questions that shape the answers that give the information about things." (Floridi 2021).

### ***Autoethnography: psychogeography & the belonging of the body***

A longer version is given in Anon (2021). This section gives a flavour of the approach.

As a teenager in foster care, I would always join the libraries closest to whichever house I was residing in – I used them to find information, find solitude and peace, and find adverts for rooms to rent in newspapers.

As a young adult, I often needed to access housing forms, health forms, and benefits forms, often living in places with no WiFi and not owning a smartphone. I studied at the library and applied for jobs from the library. I researched mental health diagnoses from the library computers; navigated psychosis at the library – sitting in the chairs and shaking; and grieved at the library – walking there, dissociated, when my dad died.

All these small happenings, my small stories, were part of a larger narrative. It is one of survival. They were also bodily responses. The way I experience loneliness – and its opposite, belonging – is physical, as well as mental and emotional.



Belonging also carries connotations of geography within my own situated knowledges – it is not just a concept applicable to feelings of being welcomed somewhere ideologically, but physically, too. It is about where our bodies belong, and where we put them. Safety, the idea of institutional trust in a public building that we generally believe will not erase, brutalise or further marginalise our bodies, but care for them, instead.

I have experienced a physicality at play in libraries, in the diversity of all the different types of bodies that use them and the equality of those bodies when they are under the library roof. How we hold our bodies, the ways in which we walk into a space or navigate it... all carries less power, less hierarchy, in libraries. My body was, and still is, the central focus of many of the negative experiences I had which led me to seek refuge in the library – to ignore this is to reinforce the collectively permitted erasure of the marginalised body that leads to the negative experiences in the first place. I do not engage in this erasure. As Squire et al (2014, 81) articulate, physical realities shape narrative too, not just verbal narrative structures, semantics and context. The body “cannot be narrated away,” and my body asserts itself in this study, it is central to my situated knowledges and therefore, my narrative.

At the same time, embodiment is shaped by narrative, so it is a cyclical thing, all parts feeding into and reinforcing each other. The stories I tell become my bodily reality, and the places I situate my body become my narrative. I am the same as the other users we heard from in the vignettes. We are no different. The researcher is the researched, and the researched are the researchers.

Psychogeography is “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of

individuals” (Debord 1955), so the movement between libraries across a city or country, the act of knowing literally where I am geographically in order to have a sense of where my body belongs, and how to move it to that place of belonging, is key to my survival. An agoraphobic for several years, I often couldn’t leave the house for weeks at a time. But when I did, the library was my anchor point. My confidence grew with routine mapped walks to the library, by understanding exactly where I was at every moment. The location of libraries determines our engagement with them, how we get to them, *whether* we get to them.

## **Discussion**

This study is original in in library/information research in taking a narrative approach, using a literature analysis, directed content analysis, and autoethnography. These methods, hitherto little used within LIS, are gaining wider acceptance. Their use here may be interesting for the discipline generally, as well as for the specific application to the value of the public library.

This close focus on the public library context allows a detailed and deep analysis. There are many narratives against library closures that are emotive, experience-based, lived testimonies, which are often met with analytical arguments based in statistics: user and membership numbers, footfall, etc. Statistics cannot ever possibly tell the full story of the library. We curate our stories based, in part, on how others have told stories like ours before; pre-existing accounts of similar experiences that feel accurate, truthful, and beyond any articulable experience when we read them.

In the process of looking for narratives of loneliness and belonging, interrelated connections were unearthed in relation to vulnerable and marginalised individuals and groups

specifically. The majority of the narratives uncovered in the methods used are linked to concepts of belonging and loneliness but also stem from, or about, these groups.

So, moving these voices from the excluded margins to the centre is one desired function of this study. Rather than reinscribing powerlessness, by joining the voices across multiple resources and enabling co-creation between researcher and researched, the voices clamouring together for the survival of the public library may be amplified, facilitating positive action and results. At the least, it provides a new conversational method to add those already used in library activism and campaigning. As Squire et al (2014, 76) posit, the “bringing together of such stories can enable collective action.”

The concept of the body belonging in the physical public library space, and embodied knowledges or ways of knowing, is just one lens through which to view the statements this study makes. Castelli (2018) tells us that “bodies are political and an embodied approach to public space is fundamental in order to re-think contemporary democracies,” suggesting that the embodied approach can “provide essential tools to undo the modern idea of an absolute individual subject that lies at the heart of the neoliberal vision, pinpointing dependency, relationship, and vulnerability as defining attributes of being human.” This is echoed by Barclay (2017) “...there are many compelling stories that library supporters could, and should, tell about the value of public library space, about the good things that happen in libraries only because library space is there as a tangible physical presence. Library space makes it possible for people to learn, socialize, escape, and connect in ways that no other present-day space—private, governmental, or commercial—can.”

In the narratives within the literature review and content analysis, we see multiple statements of belonging. These are echoed and built on with the micro-narrative vignettes, all of which highlight the social and emotional value of public libraries in the UK. Bringing these together with SD's autoethnography, we can build further on this idea of belonging, saying that the act of 'belonging' in the library is not just a concept applicable to feelings of being welcomed somewhere ideologically, but physically, too. It is about where our bodies belong, and where we put them, being able to breathe, and even, survive.

The narrative of bodies, specifically in relation to belonging and the processes they undergo when within the spaces of a physical library building, appears as an emergent finding. The autobiographical autoethnography did not start with the intention of narrating the body. This emerged when writing the act of navigating towards the library, coping with physical reactions to life circumstances, and the importance of mapping and recognising a 'pathway of survival' to and from the physical building itself; then again while responding to the connected ideas emerging from the content analysis vignettes, which were also often themed around survival.

Consequently, one positioning of this study is now that, when we accept that our bodies dictate our needs as much as our minds, we can move away from counting things in order to measure and prove value, and into deeper ways of knowing, understanding and meeting each other's needs.

Are the pieces of information within the vignettes and autobiographical autoethnography 'new knowledges'? Not when viewed in isolation and as separate from each other. It is in bringing these vignettes together as a multi-layered narrative of non-homogeneity,

one where all voices are counted individually but collectively make up a new type of knowledge, which creates and suggests a new type of narrative. “These knowledges may be particular, but they can enter into dialogue with each other and produce ... larger and more general, though still situated, narrative knowledges” (Tamboukou, Andrews and Squire 2013, 7). They are dialogical knowledges, they invite the reader to consider the presence or absence of the public library with their body, not just with their mind, through the mechanism of intense scrutiny of the body within library environments.

~~To briefly revisit the concept of neoliberalism — this is a system that cannot ever possibly meet its own systems of measurement, because although we have seen that libraries demonstrably and measurably produce economic value precisely by *not* behaving like a market, neoliberal logic is unable to recognise this, insisting against all evidence that the library would function more efficiently if it did behave like one.~~

The narratives we have now explored, it can be argued, support the claim that the physical library building matters. We have looked at themes of loneliness and belonging through the use of autoethnography and narrative inquiry, finding an emergent theme of bodies and where they belong; we have seen an overwhelming agreement across the literature analysed that public libraries in the United Kingdom reduce loneliness and increase feelings of belonging, and that the presence of the building itself, with trained staff inside, is necessary for the continued survival of both individuals and their communities at large. Through looking at the vignettes that emerged from the content analysis we saw themes of belonging and loneliness in each one – expressions and embodied knowledges that can be viewed in terms of social values, or in reference to the inherent value of the library; and we

have thought through ideas of power and protest in stories, and how together they can mobilise marginal narratives in pursuit of a larger, collective goal.

A new co-created narrative emerged from this study – one of survival, both of the vulnerable or marginalised individual, their body a part of that survival, and of the communities they – *we* – live within. Through co-creating, taking ownership of, and critically examining narratives around public libraries, we can build novel ways of finding new knowledges and positionalities – not just on the future of public libraries in the UK, but on collective belonging and collective action within civic and community participation, too.

Let us shift the terrain that we are having the argument on entirely. For the discussion to take place within the same sphere that we are saying no longer meets the needs of the phenomena, is to still be having the conversation on that sphere's terms. We can build terrains on which to converse more soulfully, rather than from a perspective of rational efficiency, because we cannot create the answer to a question using the very tools we are saying no longer work. We must reach further, into narratives, into collective autobiographies and autoethnographies, into other knowledges. If we do not facilitate this shift, then public library activists, proponents and supporters will be told over and over again, to measure more and more things, in order to demonstrate value on the dysfunctional terms of the very system creating the disjuncture in the first place. Autoethnography and narrative inquiry can create space for emotions and feelings to interplay with intellectual positionalities.

## **Conclusion**

While the methodological and theoretical instruments of autoethnography and narrative research in this study can act as just two tools in an arsenal of many, for resisting

the advancement of neoliberal measurement metrics on public libraries – they could also be used in other studies or frameworks within the discipline of LIS. Frandsen, Sørensen, and Fladmose (2021) asserted that storytelling should be a “key component of impact assessment more broadly at heritage institutions,” and that using storytelling to understand and articulate impact is key to understanding the intangible value of these services. They discovered that narrative approaches are rarely used in evaluations of the public library system, yet “introducing narratives would enable us to move from measurement to meaning.” If we are to move away from statistics and into stories as a way of knowing what value libraries have to use societally and culturally, then this seems appropriate. Additionally, as we saw with the use of autoethnography together with content analysis, and the narrative inquiry rationale, these are combined methods and lenses currently underused within LIS, and there is much potential for mobilising them in pursuit of new knowledges in this field. As Fourie (2021B, 5) argues regarding autoethnography: “it is now time for libraries and information services facing increased pressure to address social inclusion, social injustice, the needs of marginalised and vulnerable communities and the research opportunities offered by digital and virtual worlds, to embrace a deeply inquiring method.”

~~As per reviewer 1, suggestion on further work? What could I write here?~~ The use of such methods in future research to address the specific issues addressed in this paper would be welcome.

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