

Role of Libraries as a Prerequisite to Social Well-being

Samyuktha S Nair

Research Scholar, Department of Library and Information Science,
Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India
prasanth.ktprm@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

As the title suggests the paper intends to explore the role of libraries as a pre-requisite to social well-being. While the educational role of libraries and their aim in spreading social harmony is well known, this paper investigates a different perspective, the ambience of a library, which helps it to make a happy place, a place to spread the notion of communion within its users. The connection between emotional intelligence and happiness is examined to study its effect in creating a stable ambience. Ambience being crucial to mental peace, it is essential in a place called a library as people look forward to visiting a library to elevate themselves or to collect data. In both these scenarios, peace of mind cannot be overlooked. Hence the discussion on the role of a therapeutic ambience towards happiness. This paper explores the factor mentioned above that contributes towards the satisfaction of the users involved, thereby promoting social harmony and well-being.

KEYWORDS: Therapeutic landscape, bibliotherapy, well-being, happiness, social harmony, emotional intelligence.

INTRODUCTION:

Molding today's children to become better citizens of our country is a motto every academically oriented social institution upholds, and libraries play a key role in fulfilling this goal with their concept of *bibliotherapy*. Bibliotherapy is a concept that involves the use of books to help children cope with their lives. This is widely recognized as a method with which librarians can address the emotional, behavioral and social concerns of people, who appreciate the services of a physical library. Thus, more than being mere custodians of books or information, librarians play an active role in character building, which in turn is crucial in determining the kind of behaviour an individual may exhibit in the society in which he is a part.

Brewster's study supports that libraries today not only serve as a space that fulfills one's intellectual demands, but also as a place for the promotion of well-being, and the latter concept, evidently is better than the former one, which has only a curative role to play (Brewster, 2014). Technically speaking, there has been no agreed definition of the term 'wellbeing' in current research literature. However, the term has been described as "an overarching concept

regarding the quality of people's lives, whereby wellbeing is described as a dynamic process, emerging from how people interact with the world around them". (Rees et al, 2010). In other words, well-being is a state of complete mental, physical and social health, which reflects the goodness of life such as happiness and life satisfaction. In the past, libraries were expected to play a role in building and maintaining knowledge gateway (Ravi, 2008). Today, however, libraries tend to provide a therapeutic environment to their users, which in addition to educating its users, also makes sure to enlighten and entertain them abundantly. They have succeeded in transforming and improving the quality of people's lives.

LIBRARY AS A HAPPY PLACE

Happiness is a complex subject with roots in ancient philosophical and religious traditions (Intelisano, Krasko, & Luhmann, 2020), and there are various ways to define it in the academic literature. It can be defined in multiple ways, say, as a momentary emotion of pleasure (*hedonia*) or as a long-term feeling of meaning for life (*eudaimonia*). Psychological instruments to measure happiness may include characterizing it as the absence of negative emotions. Other psychological instruments to assess happiness may include cognitive and affective effects, *eudaimonia* and *hedonia*, and global and individual points of satisfaction.

The literature on the contribution of librarians to procure societal happiness is scant and can best be characterized by its inverse: unhappiness. There are a few articles that focus on library workers or library patrons, as one who promotes happiness, positivity, and general goodwill. Two key articles in this area were written by Steven Bell; the articles both focus on ways to be positive and create moments of happiness in the library organization. The major questions addressed by him include, 'What is happiness?', 'Do libraries have the capacity to deliver a happy experience to those who use them?' The answers to these, though elusive, are now accumulated with various researches on this topic having come up during the past quarter century. Librarians are now increasingly expressing an interest in the design of experiences that improve how community members interact with the full range of services, resources, and staff. They think of it as the "totality" of all that the library has to offer as an experience, not just the usability of the catalog, the cleanliness of the restrooms, or the smiles on staff faces at service points. It is now accepted that great library experiences are delivered at every touch point where community members connect with the library.

Another key article by Jason Martin talks about the types of leadership characteristics found in positive library leaders, those whom the users remember fondly for their leadership, under which they inspire others and provide stability during difficult situations. What a library has for its leader is critical to the library's success. Not only are dynamic leaders needed to navigate the library through change and uncertainty, but what is demanded of those leaders keeps changing rapidly. Hence it becomes imperative that apt leaders become librarians so that a library becomes a smooth and a happy place to be in. The way of interaction of the library staff with the users are another root of the generation of happiness, with this difference that here happiness is expressed as satisfaction. This happiness/satisfaction of the users are created through the live transactions that take place between the library professionals and the stakeholders, and hence, it is strongly recommended to probe further on how emotional intelligence procures happiness in library.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE (EI) AND HAPPINESS

Emotional intelligence (EI) is generally understood as the ability to apprehend the emotions of oneself and others and to regulate those emotions appropriately. Researchers in the 1990s led by Goleman and colleagues, focused on emotional intelligence in the workplace (Goleman, 1998; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Many others followed in their footsteps, leading to what Ashkanasy and Dorris called the “Affective Revolution” re-evaluating the role of emotions in the workplace (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017). The connections between EI, happiness, and workplace success is not necessarily causal, but multiple studies show some link between the three areas: increased competency in the areas of EI leading to increase happiness or well-being, which further takes one to an increased ability to succeed at work. Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey (2016) published a key article exploring EI as a predictor of well-being, personality, and more. Other articles on the topic have looked at emotional intelligence and its relationship to work, family conflict, quality of life, and happiness (Dasgupta & Mukherjee, 2011), as well as between emotional intelligence, personality, and subjective well-being (Higgs & Dulewicz, 2014), whether changes in EI lead to changes in related areas such as psychological well-being, subjective health, quality of social relationships, and work success (Nelis et al., 2011), and different aspects of emotional intelligence and their relationship with subjective well-being (Blasco-Belled, Rogoza, Torrelles-Nadal, & Alsi-net, 2019). These literatures suggest a strong interconnection between happiness and EI.

Along with addressing the user requirements of a library, a happy library atmosphere is fostered if it becomes a productive workplace with supportive and understanding co-workers, who collectively work towards the betterment of the institution by fulfilling the requirements/demands of all those who avail of the services. For instance, the place of EI is at its peak when the library workers have to make a collective decision on a particular point or when an argument needs to be sorted out amicably. Only a peaceful ambiance within a library would fulfill the purpose for which it has been created effectively.

The EI exhibited by library staff towards its users is seen in the amount of respect they show towards them. Library users normally tend to conflate happiness with the respect they gain and the understanding and support that they receive from the authorities. Happiness is more than just getting what you need, it is about being respected and valued. When your queries are heard and given importance, you find yourself worthy and hence happy. The cliché needs that a user places before the library staff/ authorities, like finding a particular book, restoring an old book, technical support, replacing a damaged book, etc. are of course to be addressed, but above all, there is the general behaviour pattern of the staff towards the users, no matter whether their needs are addressed immediately or not, the way they deal with them is of utmost importance. This is where happiness is rightly associated with EI. In addition to this, providing a therapeutic landscape to users is also considered important these days, along with addressing their requirements, to foster happiness and thereby wellbeing.

THERAPEUTIC LANDSCAPE IN LIBRARIES:

In the early days, the quality of a library was measured through the size of its collections and rare possessions it carries, but today the therapeutic satisfaction of users from the therapeutic landscape of a library is explored heavily to determine its quality. The idea of therapeutic landscape is widely used to describe the relationship between the place, environment and the wellbeing of the user. A therapeutic landscape carries a significant place in developing one's reading and intellectual interest that develops an appropriate well-being. According to Wilbert Gesler, the

founder of the therapeutic landscape theory, therapeutic landscape means the spaces within a library that bear a positive impact on mental health and well-being (Gesler,1983). In line with this, today libraries are designed in a manner that attracts users towards them, as a response to acutely stressful situations, creating better learning spaces. A design associated with space quality is also something which affects one's satisfaction. A clumsy environment with large stacks of books no comfortable seating and a calm ambience cannot be considered a happy library space. Library therapeutic landscape, as defined by Brewster(Brewster,2014) is a familiar and welcoming environment, with a quiet and calm atmosphere, an empowerment of library space associated with making non-commercial, unpressured decisions about what to read, an act which directly contributes to self-care by withdrawing from stressful situations into the library space. It is not only the service provided but also the space within the library which promotes mental health and well-being and has a positive impact on the library. Brewster(2014) in a study shows how the therapeutic landscape of libraries significantly raises the place of libraries in community living of a place. Based on this study, a therapeutic landscape was identified with three features:

- A. Familiar, open and welcoming
- B. Comforting and calming
- C. Empowering

In brief, the idea of a therapeutic landscape seems to describe the reciprocal relationship between library space and improvements in one's mental health. These features make a library an essential element in our life. Its relationship and engagement with communities take it far ahead of considering it as a mere social institution; in fact, the rewards of engaging with a library are seen through many intangible qualities it bears, such as functioning as a place of stress release, a place that can promote a healthy culture of life due to its ambience and environment etc. The above characteristics suggest that a library is an agent of space environment that can promote mental health, healthy culture, encourage well-being, a learning centre and a therapeutic place for its users. It transforms a library space into a place of opportunity, a place of sociability and that of stability (Sampson and Gifford, 2010). In short, bibliotherapy along with a therapeutic landscape can be a very effective tool to support society.

LIBRARIES OF THE FUTURE

Libraries ever since they came into existence were designed to procure, store and lend out the print volumes. The single job library staff devotedly undertook in the past was to make entries to these print copies, stock register them and keep them ready to use.

The libraries though often had majestic exteriors; the interior spaces were invariably kept dim with low lighting. Worse was the non-transparent ways that prevailed in most libraries to navigate and procure specialized services from these libraries; it at least appeared that these special services were preserved only for serious scholars. Of course, libraries had an acclaimed position in society, but they never made inroads into the lives of people in society expanding their horizons and improving their quality of life; they remain as static buildings. The prime space of the library was preserved for processing the new arrivals as well as preserving the existing goods. Although it is hard to get over this long-standing practice overnight, one thing is definite, this traditional way of functioning will soon push them out of the fast-moving digital world we live in today. To meet the demands of knowledge creation and dissemination the libraries should necessarily, therefore, reflect the changing values of the society. They also should parallelly reflect the vision and mission of the institution to which they function as parts. Of course, today libraries, both public and academic ones, have changed significantly but not sufficiently; the changes they have incorporated

do not seem sufficient to keep pace with knowledge creation and the demand for its dissemination. Indeed libraries have made efforts to remodel them in ways in which they can make the best use of the innovative devices introduced by information technology, but this is not enough. If libraries are to be conceived as extensions of classrooms, they should necessarily embody the changes applied in the pedagogy along with new techniques of education, such as the collaborative and interactive modes of learning.

Often it is argued that the emergence of information technology would make libraries obsolete, but one can prove the contrary if libraries incorporate technological advancement within their therapeutic space. If today's libraries succeed in educating their users on the proper technical know-how of how to use these digital devices to facilitate better library experience, then there can be no better place than a library that can function as a center for social learning. If our motto is to improve the present libraries, we must adopt a positive approach, instead of criticising and challenging the traditional notions of the library, we may rather incorporate the innovations of information technology into the prevailing practices to integrate both, which, it is presumed, can become the catalyst to transform the library into a vibrant center for the intellectual life of all academics. In other words, the focus should be to bring together the classical conception of the library, where the library is conceived as the central location for academic activities and the changing conception of it in terms of learning in the digital era in a user-focused and service-rich environment, which goes hand in hand with the current educational patterns of teaching and learning. It is common knowledge that when society changes everything in it should also change and the library is no exception for this. Library could be seen as one place, where vices of information technology give way to the traditional virtues: while the internet typically isolates people, the same technology when applied in a library, which is a physical place, tends to do the opposite. This way library is being reinvented in terms of the changing equations of knowledge production and dissemination can become the centre place of all intellectual activities of a community.

Libraries have succeeded in fostering a community hub, where interpersonal relationships are valued that allow one to overcome the isolation that a computer with which he functions offers him. Today libraries are digitized, making them more transparent and user friendly and more organized thus, getting rid of the chaotic atmosphere that existed earlier in a library, for instance, the users are free to find themselves the availability of a specific manuscript, thus saving their time and energy. The emergence of electronic databases digitalised the research manuals and the interactive media has caused a transition from the classical way of undertaking independent studies to more collaborative and interactive learning. Thus libraries rightfully occupy the role of an extended classroom in today's academic world. Such a user-friendly space is of foremost importance to avoid frustrations and thereby create a sound mind. A future library should incorporate the dynamic changes that it might inherit over time so that its space and design is appropriate at any time of the year. This is very much important so that the therapeutic ambience is not overlooked at any point in time.

CONCLUSION: LIBRARY AND ITS PSYCHO SOCIAL ASPECTS

The impact of a redesigned library in terms of the innovations in digital technology towards the psycho-social factors of a given society has been under the lens for quite some time now. Though the primary function of a library is to advance and enhance the academic horizon of a student's life, the above-mentioned social functions should not be belittled or set aside. The common academic living space that happens in a library space, where students and scholars of different discipline sit together and engage in somewhat common learning activities, which promotes a kind of social living within the library. In fact as one enters the library one inadvertently becomes

a member of a higher-order community, which endorses the person as a member of this community, a community that is expected to fulfill the higher purposes of it with the greatest sense. For many in the academic community the library continues to be a contemplative oasis, where they can get lost in the abstract world of thoughts and ideas. By aligning oneself with this higher-order community one's thoughts invariably tend to embrace the higher world of ideas and become active in seeking the well-being of the greater community and work for the general societal harmony.

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