The Experience of Libraries Across Time: 
Thematic Analysis of Undergraduate Recollections 
of Library Experiences

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To understand the human experience of libraries and the implications this understanding has for library use and service, education, and design, 118 undergraduate students were asked to list three personally memorable incidents concerning library use. Following this, they were asked to write a short narrative of one of these experiences. Incidents reported by participants ranged from preschool to college age, and content analysis indicated that a majority took place at two or more grade levels, sometimes as early as the participant's first (preschool) visit to a library. Phenomenological analysis of individual narratives produced a thematic structure for each of the four grade levels represented in the data: elementary school and younger, middle school, high school, and college/adult. Themes common across all four levels include Atmosphere, Size and Abundance, Organization/Rules and Their Effects on Me, and What I Do in the Library. A theme of Memories was unique to narratives that took place during elementary and younger age levels. Although all remaining themes were noted across age levels, the relative importance of various themes and subthemes was different at different ages. Implications of the thematic structure for library practice are discussed.

Introduction

Efforts to understand the impact of libraries upon patrons usually focus on a particular library. The methods most often used include questionnaires about resources and services, focus groups, and use statistics such as counting the number of times a database is accessed or the number of reference questions asked each month. These methods seek information about specific aspects of libraries and their use that are based upon librarians’ perceptions of libraries and library use. The newly constructed instrument, LibQUAL+*, is designed to provide a measure of patrons’ perceived quality of library function at research libraries (Snyder, 2002). It was developed to help individual institutions assess their service goals and to facilitate comparison of service across peer institutions.

A different approach to understanding the impact of libraries on patrons seeks a first-person description as to how individuals experience them in everyday life. From this type of description it is then possible to describe the human meaning of libraries and, on the basis of this understanding, to develop better and more useful procedures. Unlike other descriptive approaches, first-person meanings cannot be known at the outset of an investigation, but emerge on an inductive basis from open-ended conversations between the researcher and the participants. There is no attempt in this type of research to constrain the participant in any way, as is true in the case of questionnaires; rather, the intent is to let the participant describe his or her experience in all of its individual ambiguity and concreteness. Only in this way does it become possible to learn about the human meaning of the library experience as it is lived and described by ordinary users of the library; in the present case, undergraduate students at a large Southeastern university.

Review of Related Literature

The methods used in this study include both content analysis and phenomenological interpretation of participant descriptions of specific library experiences that stood out to them. Content analysis is a method for analyzing linguistic and observable phenomena that are amenable to categorization. It has been used in many fields including library and information science. Hosti (1969), Berelson (1971), Krippendorff (1980), and Weber (1990) provide a theoretical
framework and specific methods for designing a study, collecting data, coding, analysis, and assessing reliability. Ranyard and Williamson (1996) and Nandy and Sarvela (1997) further discuss reliability issues in regard to content analysis.

Phenomenology offers a different qualitative method that seeks to explore and describe the nature of a phenomenon as experienced. The end product of such a study is a thematic structure of the phenomenon as lived that encompasses the various ways in which individual participants describe the phenomenon. This approach represents a radical break from the standard research ideal in which there is a necessary and clear separation of subject and object; observer and observed. Phenomenological research contends that subject and object are intimately interrelated—the experience of things and events always occurs in relation to someone—and that it is not possible to reach complete objectivity. Moreover, the interrelationship between an individual and the world is such that neither has intrinsic existence apart from the other. Instead, an individual and his or her world coconstitute each other. This does not suggest that an understanding of the world is limited to one’s particular perceptions, however, because it is possible to try to hold one’s assumptions in abeyance and learn about the experience of some object on the basis of first person descriptions by individuals having the relevant knowledge (e.g., having used a library).

Phenomenology as a research method is meant to enable systematic study of experience as it is lived. It has been described as “radically empirical” because it aims to describe phenomena or experience without relying on preexisting knowledge, theories, or assumptions. The result of such activity is a description of the thematic structure or essence of the experience from the perspective of those who have had the experience. Additionally, a background or ground sometimes emerges as a stable backdrop that serves to contextualize the thematic structure obtained. Using this approach, care is taken by the researcher to limit the effect of presuppositions that may interfere with understanding another’s experience by a process called bracketing. In bracketing, one attempts to suspend everyday assumptions and focus on the immediate phenomena and the variety of ways in which it can be experienced. Phenomenological inquiry seeks to uncover and describe the essence of the experience so that the reader comes away with a sense of the experience as it is lived, whether or not the reader has lived that experience. This essence is expressed as a cluster of figural themes and perhaps a ground upon which the themes appear. Using the language of Gestalt psychology, it is said that the themes stand out against the ground (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997).

Phenomenological studies typically analyze 6 to 12 individual dialogical interviews that can run between 1 and 2 hours each. A single interview can result in 20 typed pages when transcribed. In these interviews, participants are asked to select and describe in detail a few specific incidents that stand out to them when they were aware of the topic under study. For example, in studying the human meaning of nature they might be asked, “Please describe several specific incidents that stand out to you when you were aware of nature.” Participants are asked to describe incidents that “stand out” to them about an experience because phenomenological research seeks to capture the person’s direct or prereflected experience of the topic of interest. Asking someone to explain what “something means” is likely to yield an abstract description far removed from direct experience. The present procedure, therefore, is designed to make it easy for participants to describe in a detailed way what they were (or are) aware of rather than asking them to undertake the considerably more difficult task of developing a conceptual analysis of the situation.

Requesting participants to select unique exemplars is also significant because the events chosen are likely to have clear personal significance. These events are not thought to be “atypical” in the sense of being unrelated to the person’s usual experience in that setting; rather, each situation chosen is thought to be a mnemonic nexus serving to connect a set of memories having a common meaning for the person in that situation. These situations are only “atypical” in that they are uniquely revealing—they are more worth talking about, contain more meaning, and serve to structure understanding of later experiences.

The meaning inherent in the experience is then determined on the basis of a careful thematic analysis of the specific cases described by the participant which, in combination with responses provided by other participants, yields an overall thematic meaning of the research topic. As a rule, several interviews are analyzed until a high level of redundancy is reached in the emerging themes, then two additional interviews are recorded and analyzed. If no new themes emerge, additional interviews are not deemed necessary. A clear, detailed description of the method used in this study as it is applied to interview data is provided by Thomas and Pollio (2002).

The thematic structure of an experience can also be captured on the basis of shorter descriptions provided by a larger number of participants (N > 100). Golledge and Pollio (1995) compared the interview and short essay methods when studying the human experience of language. In their study, they thematized 15 interviews and 154 shorter descriptions that averaged between 7 and 10 sentences in length. Interview and essay data were analyzed separately, and results indicated that interviews produced “more highly patterned (but not different) thematic structures” (p. 99). Beier and Pollio’s (1994) study of the experience of being in a social role provides another example of use of the short essay format.

A different method for describing human experience was developed by Marton (1981; Marton & Booth, 1997), and is called phenomenography. Although this method shares some common language and techniques with phenomenology, it differs both in technique and in the final form of the results. Perhaps the most familiar example of phenomenographic research in the library and information science literature is The Seven Faces of Information Literacy by Christine Bruce (1997a); the work is nicely summarized in

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article format (Bruce, 1998). As a research method, the goal is to arrive at an understanding of all possible variations of the ways in which a particular experience manifests itself. These are referred to as perspectives or facets of the experience, and together make up what is called an outcome space. As an illustration, Bruce (1997b) describes the perspectives from which information literacy can be experienced:

- Category 1: Information technology conception
- Category 2: Information sources conception
- Category 3: Information process conception
- Category 4: Information control
- Category 5: Knowledge construction conception
- Category 6: Knowledge extension conception
- Category 7: Wisdom conception

These variations are described abstractly, and are in marked contrast to phenomenological results that take the form of a thematic structure using the language of the participants. This latter research convention is used in an attempt to describe human experience in as concrete and personal a way as possible and to avoid higher order abstractions that capture the researchers and, not necessarily, the participants’ understanding and/or experience.

Library Research

The present study is related to the body of literature that addresses library evaluation and assessment. Library evaluation and assessment has overlapping yet different goals in relation to the present research. Evaluation and assessment are typically aimed at assessing a particular library’s resources and services at a particular time—a snapshot of quality. Although the purpose of this study is not to evaluate a particular library or libraries in general, an understanding of the way that libraries are experienced should aid in understanding what library patrons may want or need in the way of library services. In addition, first-person results should also inform us as to what is pleasant or unpleasant, inviting or alienating about libraries.

In July of 2002, a search in the database Library Lit retrieved nearly 16,000 articles using the term evaluation, nearly 2,500 studies using libraries and evaluation as subject terms, and over 2,500 use studies. Such studies are both useful and necessary for providing good service to the largest population at reasonable cost. Traditional assessment methods include surveys to measure patron’s opinions, indirect measures such as use statistics, and to a lesser degree, focus groups and interviews. Others have also recognized the need for first person perceptions of library service. For example, in the past few years, considerable effort has gone into planning, testing, and implementing the new LibQUAL+ survey designed to assess patrons’ perceptions and expectations of individual libraries’ service quality and to provide a means of comparing results among peer institutions. The new measure grew out of SERVQUAL, a well-researched instrument designed to measure quality of service delivery in the business sector that focuses on the gap between customer expectations of service, minimum acceptable level of service, and service received. SERVQUAL was transformed to fit the library environment using extensive qualitative data including 60 interviews with faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students conducted at nine Association of Research Libraries (ARL) libraries (Kyrillidou, 2000). The service dimensions identified in the SERVQUAL instrument along with new dimensions derived from the qualitative data were pilot tested, extensively analyzed, then pilot tested again. The resulting instrument measures perceptions along four dimensions: Service Affect, Library as Place, Personal Control, and Information Access (Kyrillidou, 2001; Snyder, 2002; Waller & Hipps, 2002).

Additional studies concerning patron perceptions take the form of assessment and evaluation (Jenkins, 2001; Morris, Hawkins, & Sumison, 2001) or examine perceptions of particular aspects of the library such as space (Pothoff, Weis, & Montanaelli, 2000). Some published reports about library experiences take the form of personal memories or anecdotes, such as those by Cummings (1995) and Dooley (1991). One study that describes undergraduate library experiences (Whitmire, 2001) is actually a study of library use patterns across 3 years of college that analyzed data from two existing surveys: the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, a component of the National Study of Student Learning, and a survey from the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment. The 11 questions within these surveys that relate to libraries ranged from how often one used the card catalog or computer to how often one asked a librarian for help.

The purpose of the present study involves a single, relatively straightforward question: How do people experience libraries? As such, it seeks to provide a psychological perspective of library experience and to offer another means by which to think about how libraries and librarians are affecting and serving their clients. The objective of the study is to understand the human experience of libraries from the first-person perspective of undergraduate students who attend a large research university and use libraries for a variety of reasons. A clear conception of how patrons experience libraries may help librarians provide better resources and services to their patrons.

Research Design and Data Collection

The study was performed at a large state university in the southeast with an enrollment of over 25,000 students. The university offers 146 graduate and professional degree programs and 110 undergraduate programs. The student population is 48% male, 52% female, and undergraduates make up 77% of the student body.

Study participants were lower division undergraduate students enrolled in a freshman introductory psychology class. Introductory psychology students tend to be a diverse population with good representation from the sciences, so-
sical sciences, and humanities. Students volunteered to participate and received extra credit toward their course grade.

**Method of Data Collection**

A single-page handout explained the purpose of the study, provided a statement of informed consent, and requested three types of information: (1) basic demographic data, including age, sex, academic department or major, and graduate/undergraduate status, (2) a short description of three specific incidents related to libraries, and (3) a longer description of one of the three incidents. All responses were anonymous. The specific instructions used to elicit incidents read:

Please **list three** specific library experiences you have had that stand out to you. The experiences should be **specific incidents** rather than general experiences. They can be related to **any library at any time in your life**. Please name and locate the library in your response, if possible.

Instructions for the longer, more detailed narrative were as follows:

Please **select one** of the specific experiences above and describe the experience in as much detail as you choose. You may use the reverse side as needed.

Data were collected during two different semesters: at the end of Fall semester 2001, and at the beginning of Spring semester 2002. One hundred nineteen students in groups that ranged in size from 1 to 29 participated once each for approximately 20 minutes. One researcher collected the data both semesters with help from an assistant during Fall semester. Students were told the purpose of the study was to understand library experiences and not to evaluate how well the university’s libraries function. Instructions were given for completing the survey and an explanation of informed consent was provided before surveys were distributed.

**Data Preparation, Case Evaluation, and Overview of Analytic Procedure**

All data were collected in handwritten form and typed before being analyzed. A participant’s data was eliminated if the participant: (1) indicated that he/she was not an undergraduate student, or (2) included fewer than three brief descriptions. On the basis of these criteria, one participant was removed and 118 participants comprise the final sample.

**Content Analysis and Coding Reliability of Brief Descriptions**

All descriptions produced by participants in response to the first question were content analyzed along two dimensions: **school level** and **type of library**. School level was coded into six independent categories: (1) preschool, (2) elementary school, (3) middle school, (4) high school, (5) college or adult, and (6) unclear. Library type was coded into five independent categories: (1) public library, (2) school (K–12) library, (3) college library, (4) special library, and (5) unclear.

A few conventions were adopted to assist in coding. **Storytime** at a public library was interpreted as a preschool experience unless otherwise indicated. Certain words, such as **young**, **little**, and **child** that are not school-age specific, were occasionally used to describe early experiences. To aid in coding incidents described using these words when the school level was not specified, all instances of each word were identified and examined to determine if word use was consistent with respect to school level across users. **Young** (three mentions), **kid** (11 mentions), and **little kid** (two mentions) were consistently used to describe elementary school experiences. **Very young** (two mentions), **little** (two mentions), **younger** (seven mentions), and **child** (four mentions) were used to describe more than one school level and were deemed unclear when no additional information was given.

One hundred eighteen participants contributed three instances each, yielding a total of 354 incidents. All incidents were coded on the basis of school level and library type, resulting in 708 coding events. The first researcher coded all briefly described incidents and a second coder performed cross coding on a subset of these incidents. Six hundred sixty coding events were judged unambiguous and 48 were judged as slightly ambiguous but codable based on “common knowledge” and/or on other information provided. Twenty-five of these incidents concerned school level and 23 concerned library type. Crosscoder reliability of the 48 ambiguous events was 70.8%, using the formula given in Hosti (1960): $C.R. = 2M/(N_1 + N_2)$, where $C.R.$ is coding reliability; $M$ is the number of coding events agreed upon by both coders; and $N_i$ is the number of coding events assigned by the $i$th coder.) Additionally, 10.1% of the remaining incidents (i.e., those judged as not ambiguous) were cross-coded by randomly selecting responses containing none of the earlier 48 incidents. Reliability was 94.4% for this additional set of incidents. A weighted average across both crosscoded samples gave a reliability of 92.8%, well above the level suggested by Krippendorff (1980) as an acceptable level of crosscoder agreement.

**Thematic Analysis of the Narratives**

One hundred eighteen narratives, one per participant, were evaluated in this portion of the study. Thematizing was done in part by the researcher working alone and in part using an interpretive research group with eight or more members. The use of an interpretive group in developing themes is meant to minimize bias that could result from the preconceptions or expectations of a single individual working alone. When working in the group, a single essay is read.
aloud and important ideas are noted and discussed. Care is taken to stay with the descriptions, remain true to what is said, and refrain from theorizing or drawing inferences. When working alone, the goal is the same. Recurring ideas are noted and as the data are read repeatedly (both alone and with the group), these ideas begin to cluster and general themes begin to emerge. The resultant thematic structure is then related to individual narratives. This is done by reading narratives in light of the themes to determine if the thematic structure captures the essence of the collective experience as well as individual descriptions.

Preliminary evaluation of all 118 narratives revealed that participant descriptions were qualitatively different for the various school levels and warranted a separate thematic analysis for each level. Only three preschool incidents were described at length, so preschool and elementary groups were combined. The resulting groups for thematic analysis and the number of incidents analyzed in each group were: elementary and younger (24), middle school (7), high school (25), and college/adult (57). Five incidents were unclear as to school level and were evaluated but were not used in the final description. Middle school themes are reported and interpreted with caution because of the small number of narratives for this age group.

Thematic structure was essentially stable across school levels but the relative importance of themes and subthemes changed. To facilitate tracking the shifting importance among the themes, thematic phrases and ideas were compiled from individual incidents within each school level, sorted according to theme, and counted.

Results

Demographic Data

Demographic results for major, sex, and age of the participants indicate that 61% of the sample was female, 35% was male, and 4% did not respond to this question. Thirty-four percent of students were undecided as to their major, 21% were in business, and 13% were in the social sciences. Median age was 19 years of age, with a range of 18–26 years.

### Table 1. Incidents by school level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School level</th>
<th>No. incidents</th>
<th>Percentage incidents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or adult</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear as to school level</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Distributions for number of school levels mentioned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of School Levels Mentioned</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One School Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or adult</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two School Levels</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College &amp; high school</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College &amp; middle school</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College &amp; elem. school</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College &amp; preschool</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school &amp; middle sch.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school &amp; elem. sch.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school &amp; preschool</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid. school &amp; elem. sch.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three School Levels</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College-High-Middle</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College-High-Elem.</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College-High-Presch.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College-Middle-Elem.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-Middle-Elem.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No identifiable levels</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>100.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School Levels and Library Types

Analysis of the 354 incidents reported by participants produced a distribution of episodes by school level1 (see Table 1); further analysis revealed the specific pattern of participants who mentioned one, two, three, or no identifiable school levels (see Table 2). When all three of a participant’s incidents occurred at one school level, it was most often at the college or adult level (22 participants). When two levels were mentioned, they generally consisted of a college-level experience combined with one other level. This tendency for college library experiences to be most salient also is to be noted in students reporting episodes at all three levels. Results in Table 1 indicate that college level experiences accounted for over 36% of the total incidents reported.

Table 3 indicates that among the 354 incidents, college libraries were first in frequency followed by school and public libraries. Twenty-one percent of participants described only one type of library, 53% mentioned two types of libraries, 23% mentioned three different types, and 2% failed to mention any particular type.

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1 Preliminary analysis revealed that over 70% of participants described incidents from two or more school levels. To determine if this pattern was typical, a second group of volunteers was solicited from a sophomore-level humanistic psychology class. The course instructor collected the second set of data using the same instructions and 79 students elected to participate. Again, students reported episodes at all developmental levels.
TABLE 3. Distribution of incidents by library type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Library type</th>
<th>Number of incidents</th>
<th>Percentage of incidents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Library</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School (K-12) Library</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Library</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Library</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear as to type</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thematic Structure Derived from the Narratives

The thematic structure that emerged from the longer narratives included a ground, five main themes, and nine subthemes. The ground, or background, against which the experiences took place, was the self. The self is the subjective experience of oneself, the “I” and the “me” in the experience described by the participant. Although this ground was not always described directly, it was always present implicitly or explicitly. The specific themes and subthemes include:

1. Atmosphere
   - Surroundings
     - Quiet versus Not Quiet
2. Size and Abundance
3. Organization/Rules and Their Effects on Me
   - Organization and Rules
   - Help versus No Help
   - Lost, Confused, Don’t Know How versus Knowing How Discomfort versus Comfort
4. What I Do in the Library
   - Change and Learn
   - Relationship
   - Work, Play, and Other Activities
5. Memories (Unique to Elementary and Younger)

The first three of the major themes, Atmosphere, Size and Abundance, and Organization/Rules and Their Effects on Me (Organization & Effects), focus on the library environment and its organization. They describe the effects of the world on the self. The final two themes, What I Do in the Library (What I Do) and Memories, focus on the person. They describe the effects of personal activities and memories on the self. The theme of Memories was unique to narratives dealing with elementary and younger school levels. Examples taken from participants’ written descriptions for each of the themes and subthemes are included in subsequent sections of the article to provide a sense of the richness of the narratives produced by participants and to bring the various themes to life. Some examples speak to more than one theme and this is noted when it occurs.

Table 4 presents the relative frequencies of occurrence of all four themes for the various school levels and Table 5 provides the frequencies of the subthemes. As may be noted, different themes are differentially salient at different age levels. Only the theme of Memories occurred at a single level. The theme of Atmosphere, while occurring at three of the four levels, was absent at the middle school level. The theme of What I Do was most figural for elementary and younger levels and the theme of Organization and Effects was dominant in middle school. This same theme was also salient at the high school level followed by the theme of What I Do. At the college level, values were fairly equally divided among all themes with the theme of Organization & Effects being the largest and Atmosphere the smallest.

Theme 1. Atmosphere

Different aspects of the library environment were frequently described, particularly in stories at the elementary and younger and at the college/adult levels. Descriptions included body-oriented experiences involving sight, sound, smell, and temperature combined with more psychologically oriented experiences captured in terms such as beautiful, relaxing, peaceful, and spacious. References to both quiet and not quiet occurred frequently enough within the college/adult and high school levels to warrant two subthemes within Atmosphere: Surroundings and Quiet versus Not Quiet.

Subtheme A. Surroundings

Students expressed a keen awareness of the library environment from the perspective of bodily senses:

- While reading the books, I remember the distinctive, musty smell of the old books and the cold library. (Elementary and younger)

- Our librarian would grab a basket with a list inside that stated what two people were allowed to sit in the tub for that week! The tub was this old fashioned, really deep (bath) tub that on the inside had been carpeted with different colored carpet and filled with pillows. (Elementary and younger)

- It didn’t just have books but beautiful artwork everywhere. The library seemed to have everything there that could possibly relax you visually. (College/adult; visual and psychological)

- Many participants conveyed a feeling of the psychological atmosphere:

  - They had huge pillows and big comfy chairs everywhere. (Elementary and younger)

  - My high school library was always decorated with projects from the art classes . . . It was very beautiful! (High school)

  - Even if you aren’t in the mood to study, you feel an aura of intelligence around you that pushes you to “hit the books.” (College/adult)
TABLE 4. Themes by school level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Elem. and younger</th>
<th>Middle school</th>
<th>High school</th>
<th>College/adult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atmosphere</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size and Abundance</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization and Effects</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>67.9%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I Do</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memories</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 100.0 100.0 100.1 100.0

Subtheme B. Quiet versus Not Quiet

This subtheme emerged at the high school level and became more prominent at the college/adult level:

I didn’t mind staying in the library because it had a very quiet and cozy environment which made the research go by much faster... (High school)

I also go up to the upper levels to study and do homework because it is very quiet and no distractions. (College/adult)

The area that is supposed to be quiet is anything but quiet. That is usually the case no matter where I go in the library. (College/adult)

It was very crowded up there and I could not concentrate bc of all the noise and fuss around me. I decided to go downstairs to Reserves and study. That was even worse. There were so many people trying to study—well maybe not studying. It was more like a social event. (College/adult)

Theme 2. Size and Abundance

The theme of Size and Abundance increased in prominence as students moved from descriptions of elementary school experiences to college/adult experiences and from small, children’s libraries to a large research university library. Although size and abundance are potentially different aspects of the experience, they were so frequently linked as to form a single theme with intertwining aspects. Large-ness and smallness was frequently discussed, as was the experience of many different areas, sections, or floors in the library. The theme of Size and Abundance was prominent at all age levels:

The most interesting thing is that I have no memory of the outside of the library, just the inside with the selves and immensity of the building. (Elementary and younger)

I grew up in a small rural town where the library was really small. (Elementary and younger)

The library seemed huge! I figured that the big library downtown would have more useful information than my school library, so I had my mom drop me off. First, the library was about 5 or 6 stories high and of course, was stacked full of books. (Middle school)

TABLE 5. Subthemes by school level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and subthemes</th>
<th>Elem. and younger</th>
<th>Middle school</th>
<th>High school</th>
<th>College/adult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atmosphere</td>
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<td>5.6%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surroundings</td>
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<td>0.0%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet vs. Not Quiet</td>
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<td>0.0%</td>
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<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size and Abundance</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization and Effects</td>
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<td>67.9%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization and Rules</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
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<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help vs. No Help</td>
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<td>14.3%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost, Confused vs.</td>
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<td>9.7%</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Knowing</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discomfort vs. Comfort</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I Do</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change and Learn</td>
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<td>7.6%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work, Play, and Other</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
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<td>22.2%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memories</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
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<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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When I entered the library I was overwhelmed at the number of books. (High school, in reference to a large public library)

I was overwhelmed by the many sources of information I could use. (High school)

The first time I went there to the library was on our freshman orientation tour. It was huge. I felt extremely overwhelmed by everything in there. (College/adult)

Theme 3. Organization/Rules and Their Effects on Me

This theme and its subthemes relate to the intellectual and physical organization of libraries, to library rules and policies, and to their perceived effects on library patrons. Two subthemes relate specifically to how the library is organized and run: Organization and Rules and Help versus No Help. Two subthemes describe how people react: Lost, Confused, Don’t Know How versus Knowing How and Discomfort versus Comfort. Theme 3 was of minor importance in incidents concerning experiences of elementary and preschool ages, where the focus was more on rules, privileges, and help. This theme became progressively more prominent in middle school, high school, and college. In fact, rules and organizing principles were the main focus within this theme for middle school and high school narratives while a sense of being lost and confused dominated the stories of incidents within the theme for college age experiences.

Subtheme A. Organization and rules

When I got my first library card, I was very excited because I didn’t have to get my mom to check out books any more. You had to be 10 years old to get the card. (Elementary and younger)

I went to the library to check out a book when I was in the 8th grade because I just wanted something to read. When I approached the librarian to check out the book, she asked for my library card. A few seconds later, she told me that I owed the library $200 for 3 checked out books that I never returned. I told her that there must be a mistake and I asked her when were the books checked out. She told me that she couldn’t give out that information. (Middle school)

Then we realized that the books were not organized by the Dewey decimal system, like all the libraries we had used before. It took us a long time to figure out where the books were that we needed. (High school)

And it gave me the little library code number too, you know, the numbers and letters on the side of the book that help keep them in order. (College/adult)

Subtheme B. Help versus No Help

Helpful situations were described more frequently than unhelpful situations with the ratio of helpful to unhelpful experiences lowest at the college/adult level.

The librarians knew my name, and they always offered to read us stories or help us pick out books. (Elementary and younger)

I tried looking for someone to ask for help from; at one point I found an information desk, but no one was there. A pay phone was near the desk so I decided to call my mom. By the time she had picked up the phone, I was in tears, begging her to help me. . . . she drove back to the library and together we found the material needed for my paper. (Middle school)

After attempting to find what I was looking for, I decided to ask a librarian for help. I explained my assignment and she immediately knew what would help me and where it was. I don’t remember the name of it, but it had everything I was looking for. So I got the information I needed, thanked the librarian, and left. (High school)

The woman at the desk appeared to be an older college student. I asked her for assistance and she was very unwilling to help or to show any amount of respect towards me. She sighed, gave short rude answers to my questions, then finally just handed me a sheet of paper explaining how to go through the process. (College/adult)

Subtheme C. Lost, Confused, Don’t Know How versus Knowing How

This subtheme first appeared in middle school and continued on through succeeding school levels, attaining greatest prominence at the college/adult level.

The [Named] County Library was much bigger than any library that I’d ever seen before. I was unfamiliar with any type of library system, so I was lost for the first 30 minutes of my library experience. (Middle school)

After many hours spent in our own library at [Named] High School, we decided to come to [Named] Library at [Named University]. We had no idea what was in store for us. We had no idea where to even start once we walked through the doors. Once we found our way to where the books were, we got on the computers to locate books about our topic. We thought that this would be a fairly simple task. Then we realized that the books were not organized by the Dewey decimal system, like all the libraries we had used before. It took us a long time to figure out where the books were that we needed. (High school)

I remember the first time I went in to the [Named] Library was to do an assignment for English Class about the library. I was so scared that I had one of my friends to go with me. We both had no clue of where to start. We had to ask for help many times. I was so glad that I had someone with me because I didn’t want to get lost and look stupid. (College/adult)

Subtheme D. Discomfort versus Comfort

Experiences of discomfort outnumbered those of comfort. Several stories described a movement from discomfort...
to comfort as the participant learned how to use the library. An opposite change may be seen in the remark of one student who noted that, “somewhere in time, it went from being fun to being boring . . .”

When I was in elementary school, every Saturday was something to look forward to. The public library in my hometown had “Children’s Time” for an hour. (Elementary and younger)

I couldn’t find any research material in the library for a paper I had and I started to cry. (Middle school)

When I was a senior in high school, we had a weekly paper we had to write for our econ/gov’t class. The papers were what our thoughts and interpretations of famous quotes about democracy. So every Thursday, a group of our friends would all go down to the [Named] Library and research the quotes. Sometimes there were two of us, sometimes ten. We would get the librarians to help us find the quotes, copy them and find any other information that was useful in the matter. Once we were done with that, we would all just hang out there at the library. We would run around and check out the different floors, surf the Internet (since it was still fairly new to us) and just hang out and talk. We would stay until it closed some nights b/c we were having so much fun doing “school work.” (High school; work, relationship, help, play, and comfort)

The library seemed to be huge and I didn’t know how to find what I needed. I didn’t know which room to go in or who to ask for help. I was looking for a certain book for one of my classes and I asked someone for help and that person sent me to another person in another room for help. Then that person sent me to another floor for help on finding the book. In the end I found myself leaving the library empty handed and had been there for 2-3 hours. I was extremely frustrated and ever since then I have had this hate for the library. This year I am more aware of how to use the library and I don’t mind it as much, but it is still not one of my favorite places. (College/adult; no help, discomfort)

Theme 4. What I Do in the Library

What I Do was the most prominent theme for elementary and younger experiences, accounting for 59% of thematic mentions at this age. The focus on what one does at a library decreased in frequency to become the second most prominent theme for the middle school through college years. Three distinct subthemes defined the more general theme of What I Do: Change and Learn, Relationship, and Work, Play, and Other Activities.

Subtheme A. Change and Learn

In the elementary and younger school age descriptions, aspects of change and learning were highlighted. Learning alone was prominent in later experiences:

Here [the library] is where my love for reading and books started. (Elementary and younger)

The librarian sat in a chair in front of our class, with shelves of books behind her, and began to read what is still my favorite children’s story. I loved Rainbow Fish because it was a lesson on friendship. (Elementary and younger; learning and relationship)

However, a kind black lady noticed my look of confusion. She offered to help me research my paper. From her, I learned the basics about libraries. (Middle school; learning and help)

It was time for our “Big” Jr. Research paper and I had no choice but to learn how to utilize what was around me. (High school)

I am now very glad that I had to do that assignment because I feel very comfortable with the library and what it has to offer me. (College; learning, comfort, and work)

Subtheme B. Relationship

The library was described as a place that fosters relationship-weekly visits with a parent, being with friends, meeting one’s girlfriend, feeling connected to the other students on campus:

I have always remembered my mother being there with me and the two of us checking out a massive amount of books. Then we would go home and she let me read to her. (Elementary and younger)

This particular day my friend was nauseated and threw up in the little brown plastic wastebasket beside the checkout desk. Everyone else had to leave the room b/c hearing it made them sick so I held back her hair while she threw up and helped take care of her. (Middle school)

They [the librarians] were like my mom and took care of me when I was at school. (High school; describing experience as a student library assistant)

I was studying for my psychology midterm. I met up with a friend of mine who was in the class and we headed for the Reserve room. The library was filled with students [of all] ages who were busy “cramming” for their exams. It was fun, because for the first time I felt like I REALLY was part of this student body . . . (College/adult)

Subtheme C. Work, Play, and Other Activities

The library was a place to work, to relax and hang out, to play, and to goof off while attempting to work. Other activities mentioned by participants included storytelling, summer reading programs, book fairs, and special events.

I liked to read short easy books and lounge around. Many times my brother and I would play hide and seek. (Elementary and younger)

I was assigned a simple, three-page research paper, which at the time seemed impossible. I explained my situation to my
mother, so she offered to take me to the library one day after school. (Middle school; work and help)

My senior English class had to write a three page research paper on critical essays about The Hobbit. Me and my best friend goofed off for 2 hours before we got started. (High School; work, play, and relationship)

As a graphic design major I must do a lot of research about typography, past design techniques, etc. . . . I was having a dry spell "creatively" and decided to get lots of random books to get my creative juices flowing. I checked out books of plays by A.R. Gurney, some Truman Capote short stories, and some poetry. . . . I will always check books out for fun pleasure reading—not just research. (College/adult)

I really enjoyed the fact that a [Named Coffee Shop] was there. It is nice to get a drink and meet and study with people at the same time. (College/adult)

The night was a lot of fun—running back and forth from [Named Coffee Shop located in the library] and in the end we realized we had studied about 8 hours for this test. [Named] Library definitely aided in making this experience what it was. (College/adult; work and fun)

Theme 5. Memories

Some participants described early childhood library experiences. These experiences were uniquely related to stories told at elementary school and younger levels. Descriptions were vivid and detailed.

Ever since I can remember I went to the library with my mother and sister, and we would pick out books to read. We were generally at the library more in the summer. . . . It all seemed like a great memory us three going together. When I think about my experiences with the library fond memories appear. (Elementary and younger; memories and relationship)

. . . some of my first library experiences are happy childhood memories. I always felt comforted when I was there. I had some substantial family problems at that time, and the library was a warm refuge. (Elementary and younger; memories, comfort, and atmosphere)

Now every time I go to the library back home, I recall this wonderful memory of my childhood and think back to the special times I spent with my mom and books. (Elementary and younger; memories and relationship)

Discussion

It is possible to describe the typical library experience for a 19-year-old college student in terms of the themes presented in Table 4. When in the library, the student is very aware of what she does: this may include working, playing, changing, learning, and/or interacting in meaningful ways with family and friends. To a nearly equal extent, she notices the organization, the rules, and their effects on her. She often feels lost and at odds with a system she does not understand and may feel that the rules are unfair. Help is sometimes experienced as available, to her great delight and relief; sometimes help is nowhere to be found. Feelings of comfort or discomfort arise, depending upon the situation. The student is often aware of the atmosphere in the library; it may be quiet or noisy, inviting and relaxing, or stressful, but somehow it is unique and distinctive. She is aware of the size and abundance of what the library has to offer, be it large or small. Size and abundance create the feeling that the library has everything she could possibly need or, alternately, that it will be impossible to find what is needed in such a sea of resources. Fond memories of times spent with family, with friends, or with books may come to mind when she thinks of libraries.

The data also indicate that the qualitative feel and meaning of library experience changes over time. For the elementary and preschooler, the library is often a positive place of fun, of play, of learning, of relationship, and of memories. The atmosphere is comfortable and colorful. Rules, when noticed at all, are seen as either privilege-granting or harsh. The system evokes either comfort or discomfort, but help is usually available.

The seven middle school memories speak loudly of harsh, unfair rules, and stiff penalties. Feelings of being lost and confused emerge for the first time, though help is usually available. The middle school student is less aware of what he does at the library in terms of work or play, but is aware that he learns there. The atmosphere may go unnoticed.

The high school student is most aware of working and playing in the library. Although usually a place to work, it also can be a place to play and "goof off." He is keenly aware of being hindered by the rules and organization and feels limited, monitored, and restricted. In addition, the penalties for breaking the rules are stiff and unjust. The sense of feeling lost, confused, and overwhelmed decreases a bit as does the sense of changing and learning. His awareness of size and abundance increases, most likely in relation to the actual change in size of the high school and public library as he moves to a larger school and out of the children’s section at the public library. The student begins again to notice the atmosphere, but not to the extent that he noticed it as a young child nor to the extent that he will in college.

Experience shifts again in college. Size and abundance now become the most figural aspect of the library. The size of the facility and the quantity of information may initially overwhelm the student. The library is a place where she feels lost, confused, and intimidated. There are many floors and many special areas, but she may find comfort by claiming one area as her own, leaving others unexplored. Help is often needed, but it may or may not be available. She is aware that the library is a place of work and research to a greater extent, but it is still a place of relationship, a place to be with friends, and a place to meet new friends. The student has a heightened awareness of the atmosphere and is as conscious of the environment as when she was a young
child: the physical surroundings, the ambiance, and the quiet or lack thereof.

In developmental terms, the salience of various thematic elements shifts over various age levels. Interpretation about the middle school years is offered with caution due to the small number of middle school experiences elaborated upon. The theme of What I Do in the Library is prominent in awareness at all age levels. It is the most important by far for young children, declines in middle school, increases again in high school, and declines in college. The most prominent subtheme, Work, Play, and Other Activities, shows the same pattern. The subtheme Relationship remains relatively constant in awareness with about 6% of all mentions across the different ages. The lone exception occurs during middle school. The subtheme Change and Learn declines in awareness as the student ages.

Equally prominent overall is the theme of Organization and Effects. It is lowest for elementary and younger children, extremely prominent at the middle school level, and then declines somewhat during high school and college; overall, it remains the single most important theme in high school and college. Within this theme, the subtheme of Organization and Rules stands out above all other subthemes for all age groups except college/adult. It is low for the youngest age group, highly prominent for middle schoolers, less prominent for high school students, and minimally prominent at the college level. In marked contrast, the subtheme Lost, Confused versus Knowing, is not mentioned in the youngest experiences, is frequently mentioned during middle school and college, and is less frequently mentioned during high school.

The theme of Atmosphere is most prominent at the college level, somewhat less at the youngest level, and is only slightly figural or not figural at all during middle school and high school. Within the overall theme, attention to the subtheme of Surroundings is strong in elementary and younger and college levels, although a concern with the subtheme of Quiet versus Not Quiet first emerges at the high school level and increases at the college level as the library becomes increasingly a place of work and study.

Not surprisingly, the theme of Size and Abundance begins at a moderately low level and grows as the student ages and presumably moves to larger and larger library facilities. It is perhaps surprising, however, that the theme of Memories appeared only at the elementary and younger level. Stories from this period revealed a qualitatively different feel from each of the other four themes and described special times, special relationships, and happy childhood memories. It is important to note that while thematic elements shift in importance over time, they define a single thematic structure.

LibQUAL+ also utilized qualitative data based on experiences of faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates who use college research libraries. The motive behind this effort was to create an instrument for measuring service quality. Although the purposes and scopes of the current study and LibQUAL+ differ, there is a clear overlap in what emerged as important about library experiences, although aspects of experience were grouped in somewhat different ways. For example, the LibQUAL+ category Library as Place addresses the physical and psychological environment (Cook, Heath, Thompson, & Thompson, 2001; Snyder, 2002; Waller & Hipps, 2002) and mirrors the theme of Atmosphere in the present study. The combined themes of Organization and Effects and Size and Abundance are similar to the LibQUAL+ category of Information Access that focuses on comprehensiveness of the collection and ubiquity of access (Cook et al., 2001; Snyder, 2002). The theme of Size and Abundance addresses comprehensiveness as well as ease of access whereas Organization and Effects addresses access and effects of the organization and rules upon the user. The self-explanatory Personal Control dimension of LibQUAL+ is contained within the theme Organization and Effects. The final LibQUAL+ category, Affect of Service, relates to the care, responsiveness, and knowledgeability of staff (Cook et al., 2001; Snyder, 2002).

This dimension has an important, but smaller presence in the present study and is contained within the subthemes Help versus No Help and Organization and Rules, where students talk about finding help or not and about the enforcement of rules by staff. Two distinct themes in the present study that have no counterpart in LibQUAL+ are What I Do in the Library and Memories. What I Do is a prominent theme at all age levels, comprising between 25 and 59% of mentions of thematic elements at the various age levels. Memories, which were unique to very early experiences, would not be expected to emerge from a study of college libraries alone.

Implications of the findings of this research fall into several areas of interest to librarians. Librarians can compare the way study participants experienced libraries with the way their patrons may experience their library by looking at the relevant study findings and envisioning whether their patrons would have similar experiences and feelings about their library. They could also compare study findings with the way they would like their patrons to experience their library. These reasoning exercises, if carried out thoughtfully, could aid in identifying potential areas of strength and weakness in library service from the perspective of meaningful, personal experience. Librarians may also wish to talk with their patrons to understand what it is about their library that stands out, both good and bad. It may be useful to stay away from the appearance of assessment and evaluation in the process of learning what is meaningful about the library. During the preliminary stages of the research, forms identical to those used in this study were mailed to selected graduate students with a request to participate in the study by completing the form and returning it. Most of the returned forms contained extremely short “evaluation-type” responses that lacked the richness and complexity of the participants’ stories and hence, the data that those stories contained. It is likely that responding graduate students did not carefully read the instructions and did not understand that the focus of the study was the experience of libraries rather than an evaluation of the university library system. Although standard assessment and evaluation procedures are important tools for evaluating the quality of service to patrons, much can be
learned by understanding other facets of experience not likely to be uncovered with these methods.

Findings within the themes Atmosphere and Size and Abundance speak to the need to create comfortable, inviting, and livable atmospheres within libraries. Many students responded to feeling overwhelmed in large libraries by confusing their activity to one or two smaller areas within the library, such as “Reserve” or “the fourth floor.” It may be advantageous to move away from using a set decor and layout throughout an entire building and create unique microenvironments instead. Large areas can be broken into smaller areas by interspersing worktables with small clusters of comfortable chairs for reading and study. Different floors (and different areas on a single floor) can be decorated with different styles of furniture and in different colors that fit into an overall plan for the building. Using this approach, a student might recognize the fourth floor when emerging from the elevator by a cluster of blue-green upholstered chairs and a landscape painting and the fifth floor by the contemporary black and gray chairs and modern paintings that hang nearby. This approach would transform book warehouses with floors of unending uniformity into malls of small “shops” offering diverse possibilities. It would also create a more home-like atmosphere.

Students showed a high level of awareness of What I Do in the Library. Awareness of this theme by librarians can be useful in promoting libraries and library services. Focusing on “what I do” or “what I can do” brings the services and resources home in a personal way. A promotion that says “I get help with my research paper” is more likely to be remembered than advice to seek assistance at the reference desk.

The subthemes included within the theme Organization/Rules and Their Effects on Me validate the need for information literacy education at all levels and for assistance that is available at point of need. Of particular note is the need for library education at the middle school and college level. Narratives from both periods included many mentions of feeling lost and confused. Awareness of all subthemes within Organization and Effects was highest at the middle school level, where it may be presumed that there is a shift from the library as a place of fun to a place of work and study.

Narratives with the quality of Memories validate the efforts that elementary school and public libraries make in creating fun activities for children by providing storyline, reading programs, special programs, and comfortable atmospheres. The data also show the influence that good early experiences have on children’s later relationships with books and libraries. This leads to the question, what can libraries do to create an environment conducive to fond memories for older children and adults? Perhaps art exhibits, lectures, concerts, and meet-the-author series would draw people into libraries for potentially memorable events. A small jazz, classical, or contemporary group performing on a Friday or Saturday evening could draw people who might not otherwise consider spending the evening at the library.

The developmental trends that emerged from participants’ stories show that good early experiences pay off. In the words of one student, “Here [the library] is where my love for reading and books started.” The developmental data also highlight the need for information literacy at every stage of education, but particularly at times of change, whether the change is a new relationship with the library (as in middle school) or a new and larger system (as in college).

Methodologically, the approach used here—of open-ended questioning about what is meaningful—was shown to yield important issues that may be missed by questionnaires and/or other more traditional methods of evaluation. Qualitative data is harder to analyze, but the richness would seem to be worth the extra effort. The short format used in this study, which included a brief description of three incidents and elaboration of one of the three, facilitated both qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data and allowed for a greater sampling of incidents.

Further investigation is warranted with graduate students and faculty at university libraries. Themes may shift when examining stories of more experienced library users and those who have chosen research as part of their profession. Research into the experiences of public library patrons of various ages could be used to reveal what is similar and what is unique about the public library experience, and in-depth studies of students at different grade levels could help with information literacy efforts. Finally, studies of the experience of library buildings across a variety of library environments and library users could help create facilitating environments.

Conclusions

This research speaks to the lived experiences of library patrons. It highlights the strengths and weaknesses of libraries in general rather than the strengths and weaknesses of a particular library. As such, it gives librarians a way to think about the entire system from public library through school library to academic research library. Understanding the lived experience, and hence the impact, of libraries from the patrons’ perspective is timely as we try to envision what libraries will and could become. The range of resources and formats continues to increase and libraries are becoming institutions without walls. The present study also describes the development of undergraduate students’ relationships with libraries from preschool through the college/adult level in terms of what they notice most. This information can be used to help librarians create facilitating environments for their patrons, whether they are elementary school, middle school, high school, or undergraduate college students.

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References