

The Library is Open for All. Social Inclusion at the National Library of Romania

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Abstract: Based on research conducted with users and librarians of the National Library of Romania, this article discusses specific forms of integration of marginal people in Bucharest: young adults with no stable employment and pensioners. Some come to have access to information; others want to self-educate, enrich themselves culturally, and benefit from the library staff's support. The article argues that libraries should partner with other private and public stakeholders to empower librarians to deal with complex situations and foster further forms of inclusion.

Keywords: libraries; marginality; public engagement; social services; state institutions; Bucharest.

Introduction

This article is based on an investigation conducted in the central branch of the National Library of Romania between May 2023 and May 2024. It indicates that the Library is a place where specific forms of marginal people come to study and research in the context of the massive privatization of public spaces and rising inequality in post-liberalized Romania. According to sociologists Varghese and Kumar (2022), marginality is a widely used concept in the literature on inequality and development, especially in the context of rising inequality in the post-liberalized and globalized world. In this article, the term marginality refers to specific forms of exclusion, the culture of poverty and precarity, but it also refers to forms of self-social exclusion.

The National Library of Romania is an institution that has more branches: the main one in Bucharest, a branch in Alba Iulia and one in Craiova. The central branch occupies a relatively new building, the second largest in Romania. The construction started in 1986, during the Ceaușescu regime, and was finished and officially opened in 2012 (Tulbure, 2012). The National Library of Romania traces its genealogy to the first half of the 19th century when the first national library in the country was founded in the National College Saint Sava in Bucharest (Constantinescu, 2014). The Library is located in the city center, near Piața Unirii [The Union Square], with access to public transport. Out of the Library space, used for deposits of books, the library's archives and offices, the spaces that users have access to, be they Open Free Spaces or Reading Rooms, are quite generous: seven Reading Rooms and multiple open free spaces on four different floors (ground floor, the mezzanine, and first two floors). To access the Library, one needs to pay 30 lei [6 euros] per year for a library card or a daily permit of 5 lei [1 euro].

The numerous spaces that the Library has and the limited costs of library cards allow people of all categories and professions to come to study and research in the Library. Among the frequent users are students and high school pupils. To them, I will also add the categories of pensioners and adults with no regular forms of employment who find the library a good place to spend their time and be. The annual report of the National Library of Romania mentions the number of 76.712 users of Open Free Spaces (Annual Report, 2023).

Considering the diversity of users I have conducted a series of semi-structured interviews aiming to understand the needs of the Library's users and what services and

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spaces are mainly used. Brief results and discussions of this research are presented in this article.

Brief conceptual considerations

Shortly defined, social exclusion encompasses the social aspects of poverty: not only poverty concerning material goods and resources but also the inability to participate in social activities and a lack of access to services (Muddiman, 2001). Increasingly, the practice and discussions associated with libraries stress their role in challenging social exclusion in society. With this in mind, this article discusses marginality and social inclusion in the Romanian context, including people with no stable forms of employment, young adults searching for mentorship, and secluded pensioners.

There is an entire corpus of information concerned with the use of libraries by homeless people (Adams & Krtalić, 2022; Dowdell & Liew, 2019; Forrest, 2022; Humphry, 2021). Adult users who have no regular forms of employment, as well as pensioners who find the library's services important for their relatively lonely lives, are not part of a community per se, especially if the term community would denominate a well-bounded group of people, that know each other, have strong ties and share 'social organization, politics, and values' (Cole, 1997, p. 357). Still, this article argues that the presence of specific forms of marginal people in the Library and the good relations between librarians and these users is important for the life of the capital city. It also argues that librarians play a crucial role in creating communities of users and projects to integrate marginal people in the context of more secluded people living in the cities.

Methodology

The research is based on the materials gathered while conducting participant observation in the spaces of the library and from the semi-structured interviews with five users of the library and with three librarians between May 2023 and May 2024. This period also coincides with my recent employment at the Library and a specific lack of knowledge of the environment of Library users in the Romanian context. With some of these users I have conducted more than an interview. With others, only one. Interviews lasted around 30-40 minutes each. Some were recorded, others were noted down. To anonymize the research, I have not indicated the names of the users, and in some cases, I have changed some personal details.

The interviews were not part of a research project, but rather, sporadic interviews conducted in limited periods of time that I managed to create for short interactions with the users. It is important to mention that the number of employees at the National Library of Romania is shrunk compared to all the needs of the services and the spaces, and jobs require many attributes that do not necessarily leave time for research and building strategies.

Still, during this period, the materials I collected seemed to gather around two themes associated with the objectives of this research:

1. To observe some forms of marginality among various users of the National Library of Romania.
2. To understand the relationship these people have with librarians working at the Library.

Two of the users I interviewed are young adults: one is a high school student in his 17 (with approval from his guardian), and the other is an IT specialist in his 30s. The remaining three users are pensioners in their 60s and 70s. Four of them were men, and only one woman. All of them are of Romanian ethnic background.

The librarians are all women, in their early 50s of Romanian descent. Two of them are single; a third is married and has one child. All of them say that they love their job, they love to interact with people and give guidance on materials to be read, and that they do this job despite librarians' small salaries in Romania. In all the cases except the first, I

was the one to initiate the conversation, asking for guidance from my colleague librarians responsible for access to the Reading Rooms. I asked them to indicate people who often come to the Reading Rooms and ask for books and guidance.

Marginality and inclusion at the National Library of Romania

This section briefly details the interviews conducted with all five users of the Library and with the three librarians. The materials are organized mainly around the five users of the library. In parallel, the analysis of the five cases prompts and makes reference to the information I have gathered from the three librarians I worked with to enrich the understanding of the topic discussed. Their views of patrons/ utlisers are crucial for how users feel welcome in the Library space.

The interviews with these patrons/ users reveal personal reasons why people decide to come to the Library and make it a safe place of work and social interaction. Some come to have access to information; others want to self-educate themselves, enrich themselves culturally, and benefit from the library staff's support. In one case, one reader also received a consistent prize from an NGO that did a project in partnership with the National Library of Romania. This prize was really important for him, especially since he came from a large family of five, with many economic struggles. That prize showed his appreciation, and he felt that "the Library is his second home." What all these people have in common is their desire to find a place to work and get inspiration from, a place that offers the basic needs of minimal social interaction.

1

The research started abruptly in May 2023 when I was preparing to launch a big educational event in the Library. A young adult in his 30s approached me. He wanted to explain to me an idea he had in mind that the Library could implement. He proposed to talk to me on that very day. I invited him to come to an office I shared with a colleague the following day, in the morning. There, he recollected his IT expertise in different countries around the world and some great projects he was part of. He explained that other than coming to the Library every day with his laptop, for work, he was sleeping in a communal place and received money to buy food from friends and acquaintances.

The conversation lasted around 40 minutes to end with his abrupt request for 400 lei (approximately 80 euros) for him to buy some specific IT books. He argued that he needed to pass an exam that would later help him manage to get a well-paid job in the IT field. The paradox is that we both knew that the books were not to be found in the National Library of Romania. But I proposed to talk to a colleague in the library responsible for international book exchanges. I was reluctant to offer money for personal and methodological reasons. I also sensed this person's lack of desire and inability to interact with others and participate in social activities.

Since then, we have been greeting each other often. He continues to come and study in the library's spaces, especially in Reading Rooms. I did not ask what happened to his exam and project to find a well-paid job. My reluctance to talk about this subject comes from the inability to deal with complex forms of marginality.

As Dalmer et al. argue (2022, 2), "(l)ibrary staff have been and continue to be at the frontline, engaging with individuals who are contending with higher levels of social isolation and loneliness, as well as increased rates of mental illnesses and antisocial behaviours." I recognized the limits of help one can give and the limits of our societies, a lack of access to services, including psychological training that librarians might need to be equipped with.

2

One librarian mentioned to me a high school student in his 17s who was one of the most passionate readers. “He reads a lot in the Reading Rooms: Romanian history, geography, physics, and engineering,” my colleague librarian said. “He is extremely bright, and his knowledge is impressive!” she added. With my colleague, I have also invited his mother to an event the Library organized in partnership with an NGO. There, he received a prize as a sign of recognition for his hard work in the Library.

I did more interviews with this young utilizer, some seconded by colleagues librarians, or his mother, in some ceremonial circumstances.

At a young age, he and his family (comprising of his brother and sister) got through very critical moments and spent some years without guardian parents as custodians. The Library and the librarians became part of this young adult’s life in a moment when he was very lonely, when he needed a place to spend time and study, despite the cold temperatures during winter months. He states in more than one interview:

“When I come here I feel at home”.

The librarians were there to help him and the bondage created between librarians and young adults is very strong and leads to specific forms of social inclusion.

For librarians, such interactions are not perceived as challenges but as the benefits of the profession. They feel that their life has a meaning in contact with the readers and the utilizers of the Library.

3, 4, and 5

The pensioners I have talked to all have their private properties to live in. In Romania, having a house where to live brings specific forms of social security. Still, some pensioners I have encountered feel lonely and disconnected from society. In this respect, it is relevant to our discussion to note that one pensioner woman became a Library volunteer for approximately six months. During this time, we had the chance to meet and talk more often. She is married and has three children. One could argue that her position is not that of a secluded person. Indeed, the interview with her prompted me to see and understand other pensioners who come to the Library because they feel lonely, some have mental problems, and some do not express their need to become part of a larger group of friends.

Librarians mentioned to me that some pensioners who come to the reading rooms are well dressed but that they smell. I interpret this as the extreme effects of deprivation over time, but these people were not part of my research. It is important to note that librarians treat these users with respect and allow them to enter the very large reading rooms in the Library. They give them the books requested and ask them to sit in one of the corners of the rooms. Younger utilizers sometimes notice these aspects and take some distance, as the librarians observed.

Another pensioner I talked to traveled across Europe and worked in Spain, Sweden, and Germany, to return to Romania during the pandemic. At the Library, he comes to read German philosophy and literature. He has periods when he wants to cover specific disciplines and specific authors. His life and expertise in different kinds of jobs are impressive. Still, he mentioned that the Library is the only place he can trust in Romania and does not trust mainstream media or other social forms of inclusion:

“At the Library I feel that I can control my time and my actions, I do not feel controlled by others, nor by the information provided by the media.”

Because of his social seclusion, he finds the Library a place that occupies his time and gives him a purpose to live.

Conclusion

Social scientists Train, Dalton and Elkin (2000) agree that in libraries, "[p]ersons or groups may be marginalized and excluded based on ethnic origin, gender, sexuality, physical or mental disability, education, employment, and economic status." In the case of the National Library of Romania, during my research, none of these aspects were factors of exclusion. On the contrary, this article shows that people who indicated signs of social deprivation frequently used different sites of the library. They were known to and supported by the library staff in a society where economic productivity is an important factor of distinction, and most services are monetized.

This article is concerned with the desirability of "including" marginal users of the Library in mainstream society and the knowledge that public libraries are important actors in these processes of inclusion. The National Library of Romania case shows us that library workers play a crucial role while responding to some of the users' needs. At the same time, the article indicates a need for more integrated training that librarians could be equipped with training in social services and mental health problems, to mention only two.

We need public funding to be aware that libraries contribute to the social dimension of citizenship and inclusion, linked to equal opportunity and protection from poverty. More interdependency between the work of social services and that of librarians should be built in the future. As other authors have noted, "Libraries can have greater impact if they involve other individuals and groups in partnerships for service provision. These relationships are mutually beneficial. They allow local municipalities to participate in providing services that create inclusion and build for resilience" (Hoyer, 2013, p. 63).

Such knowledge should not be taught as adding more burden to the shoulders of librarians but as integrated into the city's public life services and funded accordingly by more stakeholders. Funds from city councils and other state institutions should make libraries real hubs of knowledge, especially while engaging with users with more complex needs.

The stories presented above have in common the need of certain people to find good public places where some could work, others could study, and find a minimal form of social inclusion. Aside from increasing the quality of life of marginalized persons, social inclusion contributes to social cohesion within societies and increases opportunities for a healthier society and possible economic forms of prosperity.

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