



# Do libraries matter? Public libraries and the creation of social capital

Do libraries  
matter?

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Librarians and the library profession keep repeating that libraries contribute greatly to generating social capital by “building community”. However, little evidence of this has been presented. This paper aims to be a first step towards correcting this situation by asking whether public libraries matter in the creation of generalized trust.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study used quantitative data in analyzing macro-level data on whether public library expenditure could explain social trust patterns in the OECD countries. Additionally, a few qualitative interviews with public library leaders in the USA and Norway were used to indicate by what mechanisms, or by which processes, libraries generate generalized trust.

**Findings** – The main finding is that public libraries seem the most important factor in creating generalized trust in the OECD area, even more so than efficient/impartial public institutions. However, there is the problem of causal direction. It might be the case that it is high trusting countries that prioritize public libraries. Therefore, times series data are needed as well as qualitative data on the process of trust creation in the library. Interviews with library leaders point towards the fact that they see outreach activities as creating trust and that people trust the library. Replication of these results, however, is crucial. Moreover, the findings appear to indicate that when the library’s attention is directed at disadvantaged groups of non-users it is the widespread trust in the public library institution that breeds trust among these groups too.

**Originality/value** – The paper contributes to the understanding/theory of the creation of generalized trust in general and to the role of the public library in this process.

**Keywords** Social capital, Public libraries, Trust

**Paper type** Research paper

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Douglas County libraries provides resources for learning and leisure to build communities and improve lives in Douglas County (Mission statement of Douglas County Libraries, Colorado, [www.douglascountylibraries.org/aboutUs/index.php?pageName=Mission%20Statement](http://www.douglascountylibraries.org/aboutUs/index.php?pageName=Mission%20Statement)).

The library's mission was always to find the information people needed to lead better lives. But as the years went by, how you did that changed (Marcelee Gralapp, Library director in Boulder, Colorado for 37 years).

### Introduction

Social capital[1] is associated with multiple positive societal developments, democracy, economic development, government efficiency, community development, schooling, individual health and well-being, and with combating crime, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancies (Granovetter, 1985; Putnam, 1993, 2000, 2004; Hutchinson and Vidal, 2004; Wakefield and Poland, 2005). Simply put, countries in which citizens trust each other are more likely to be better places to live than those with lower levels of trust. But where does social capital come from? While it is widely understood today that social capital is important (and that the decline of social capital in society is dangerous) we know too little about where social trust comes from and/or how it is sustained. Is it something that is endemic to certain societies (e.g. a "cultural heritage"), or is it something that is constructed and built over time?

Generalized trust means that individuals trust most people, not only their own kind (which is sometimes called "particularized trust")[2]. Generalized trust implies trust towards diverse others, people of different age, class, gender, race and ethnicity. The focus within society-centered social capital studies has turned towards race and ethnicity as expressions of diversity, and the implications of diversity for generalized trust. This research mostly tells a sad story of declining trust. Most studies show that diversity in race and ethnicity drives down trust (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2000, 2002; Costa and Kahn, 2003; Delhey and Newton, 2005; Coffe and Geys, 2006). Also studies that start out with sophisticated hypotheses about the trust-enhancing potential of diversity end up with confirming either that diversity drives down trust or that it has no effect on trust (Marschall and Stolle, 2005; Soroka *et al.*, 2005; Stolle *et al.*, 2005). Generally speaking, it seems that generalized trust is created neither in voluntary associations nor in more informal settings such as neighborhoods. However, these studies do not by themselves prove that social trust across a diverse society cannot be created. More in-depth studies exploring both the weaknesses of present research as well as other contexts and arenas for trust generation need to be conducted. In the social capital literature (Putnam, 2007), in socio-psychological research, and in the literature on social capital and public libraries, plausible mechanisms regarding the generation of social capital are described and to some extent empirically grounded.

This paper seeks to contribute to this discussion through an examination of a particular public institution that may contribute to sustaining social trust in modern societies – the public library[3]. It seems reasonable to suggest that public libraries contribute to general social trust for a variety of reasons. We evaluate these in greater detail below, but it is clear that libraries are places where (sometimes diverse) groups of individuals come and that they are the epitome of the universalistic/egalitarian public program. As we will show below, each of these arguments is at the core of the social capital literature today. We demonstrate, moreover, that there is a very strong

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correlation between high spending on public libraries and high levels of social trust among the OECD countries.

Despite the large amount of research that has gone into trying to measure social capital and/or towards trying to show which countries have more of it than others, or why not having enough can be detrimental to developing democratic institutions, there is little substantive evidence demonstrating how or whether public institutions (e.g. public libraries) actually contribute to generalized social trust (Stolle *et al.*, 2005)[4]. Perhaps, it is simply that highly trusting societies construct more universalistic programs, policies and institutions. This paper intends to contribute to this literature in two major ways: first, on the macro level, by asking whether library expenditure has an independent effect on generalized trust when comparing independent variables well-established theoretically and empirically. Second, on the question of causal direction, through exploring the mechanisms by examining public libraries in three cities (Boulder, Colorado; Castlerock, Colorado; and Tromsø, Norway). The small research that has been done on the library's contribution to social capital (Putnam *et al.*, 2003) argues that the public library can create social capital. But no real empirical research has demonstrated the hypothesized connection.

### **What do we know about the creation of social capital?**

Social capital researchers are by convention divided into two camps: de Tocquevilleans/Putnamites claim that social capital arises from associational life and informal contacts in civil society (we will call this the “contact hypothesis”); in contrast, institutionalists assert that certain kinds of public institutions and policies may build social capital.

The basic idea from the contact hypothesis is that interaction between people generates generalized trust. In some views this should even apply to contact between diverse kinds of peoples. The mechanism being that when people get to know diverse others, reciprocal relations develop and they start to trust each other, but meeting diverse others also makes it easier to make the leap of faith of applying this belief to others in general. As noted, empirical evidence is not very supportive of the contact hypothesis neither in its voluntary association version nor in its informal interaction variety. It seems well established that associations create strong ties and particularized trust rather than generalized trust. The contact hypothesis seems stronger in relation to the effects of informal interaction on generalized trust. On the one hand, this area is not well defined and a vast variety of interactions need to be investigated. On the other hand, it has strong support in the social psychological research literature (Pettigrew, 1998), where strict preconditions are set towards the nature of contact for contact to have effect on trust: “equal group status within the situation, common goals; inter-group cooperation; and the support of authorities, law, or custom” (Pettigrew, 1998, p. 65). It can be assumed that very few contexts and arenas can fulfill such strict conditions. But some arenas are closer to this goal than others. One obvious type of such an arena is universalistic welfare institutions.

Institutionalists, in contrast, argue that it is the universalistic aspect of the arena or institution itself that creates trust, not the contact. The content of the contact between street-level bureaucrats and clients follows from the rules of the institution. Universal rules treating everybody equally happen to be the tipping point that creates generalized trust.

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Social capital research from an institution-oriented perspective postulates that universalistic institutions and especially street-level universalistic public services create generalized trust[5]. Institutions and public policies treating everyone as equals, i.e. universalistic policies and benefits, as opposed to means-tested benefits, create generalized trust (Kumlin and Rothstein, 2005; Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005; Rothstein and Stolle, forthcoming). Feedback effects running from increased trust to increased electoral support for universalistic policies further increase trust. Universal policy instruments in the form of services directed towards the individual are particularly effective. Examples of universal services are old age pensions, child benefits, and public library services. As opposed to universalistic benefits, negative effects for generalized trust created by means-tested benefits include the strong feelings on the part of the recipients of welfare of being humiliated when meeting with their benefactors, the street-level bureaucrats. These encounters confirm and strengthen the feelings of inferior status felt by people on welfare, and may remove any potential for inter-group relations; they may create hostility. The fact that the middle classes (and also the rich) through universal public services receive the same benefits makes it easier for the poor to accept welfare benefits with their dignity still intact. The middle classes, for their part, feel that they get something back from the state for the taxes they pay. This way a universal welfare system is upheld, implying that if institutions, policies, and services are to be considered just by different social groupings, they must be fair and perform well. However, the micro-level mechanisms that are supposed to create generalized trust have not been conclusively confirmed. High trust in universal welfare states can also be explained by, for example, cultural and historical factors (Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005). To find an arena that fulfills Pettigrew's strict criteria it seems reasonable to turn to a universal welfare state institution. On the other hand, this particular institution needs to be open to everybody, that is, including very diverse people and cutting across national and cultural varieties. One institution not too far removed from this ideal is the public library. As a global public institution showing relatively small variation and as an open space where people meet informally, the public library can contribute to the generation of social capital from both a society-centered and an institutional viewpoint.

### **What do we know about public libraries and trust?**

According to both society-centered and institutionally oriented theories on social capital generation, the public library can contribute in the building of trust. But what is the evidence? It seems to be sparse and not very well developed. In this paper, we attempt to explore the relationship between social trust and public libraries further. Libraries have many properties important for society at large and for local communities. As information hubs with free access, they promote literacy, learning, and cultural consumption, but what suggests that public libraries are important institutions for generating generalized trust?

We demonstrate below a high correlation between per capita spending on public libraries and social trust. However, the direction of causation is not as clear. Good public libraries in a country may be a reflection of a pre-existing high level of generalized trust, rather than the other way around. The library might make people feel good, but how deep is this feeling? It might be that public library services are less important to people than other public services like social services and public schools, and therefore create less social trust than other services. On the other hand, the library

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is also an open space for contact without many strings attached (Goulding, 2004; Vårheim, 2007). This makes the public library into a meeting place broadly defined. A public library is a place where people can interact more or less, from seeing another person, to acknowledge this person by nodding, to engaging in conversation, to arranging a meeting with an author. In addition to level of engagement meetings take place at different levels of formality. As a public space, the public library is a meeting place involving mostly weak ties between patrons, a low intensive meeting place (Audunson, 2005; Audunson *et al.*, 2007). High intensive meeting places as the work place and voluntary organizations involve strong ties. “Weak ties” are often linked to generalized trust, while “strong ties” go with particularized trust (Granovetter, 1973). This means that public libraries can contribute to the creation of social capital from a society-centered point of view, although within an institutional setting, but what are the indications that they do?

The literature on public libraries and social capital is very small, and presupposes that the public library creates social capital (Hillenbrand, 2005; Vårheim, 2007). The social mechanisms that are assumed to create social trust seldom are specified. However, in Cox *et al.* (2000), which is the only comprehensive study of public libraries and social capital to date, such mechanisms are elaborated. Here, as in most of the literature, the production of social capital is understood to be a side effect of library activities whether they are core library activities or outreach activities/community related activities. Cox *et al.* (2000, p. 7) find that “libraries function to enhance social interaction and trust, and that they foster equal access and a sense of equity within the community within which they are placed, which in turn contributes to social capital”, and describe the process by which social capital is supposed to be created in public libraries:

Social capital is accumulated as a by-product of those interactions which contribute to a community or group sensing that their access to an institution, such as a library, enhances their functioning within the wider society. In turn, those spaces which provide social capital possibilities contribute to the cohesive social fabric, even though they may not be recorded or recognised (Cox *et al.* 2000, p. 7).

In other words, access to the public library space/infrastructure creates interaction that users think are socially helpful and thereby generates social trust. One finding of the study is that the library is considered a safe place to be. Consequently, different groups meet in the library. During daytime it is mostly young and old people that accommodate to each other. The library thus can create trust between community groups. Further it is a strong perception among users and non-users that the library is for everybody, nobody is excluded. Knowing that the library exists, as a possibility, is important to non-users. Cox *et al.* maintain that their report shows that the public library creates interaction, a sense of equity, and trust, i.e. it creates social capital. The mechanism that creates generalized trust is the library institution in itself, as well as the library space functioning as a low intensive meeting place. This means that two different mechanisms connected to the public library that contribute to generalized trust are identified. One mechanism is institutional and policy related. The other mechanism grows out of the library space as a place for informal meetings between library users.

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### Two propositions

From the general literature on social capital we derive two propositions about the relationship between libraries and social trust. First (from the contact hypothesis) as a meeting-place, the public library may create social capital through face-to-face interaction between library users, and between users and librarians. If this is true, we would expect to find that library users have higher levels of social trust than non-library users. We explore this proposition below. Second (from an institution-centered perspective), one can argue that the public library creates social capital by being a universal service institution. Library services, after all, are for everyone. The library is perhaps among the most open and universalistic institutions that exist. This proposition is more difficult to test empirically. Once again, while the statistical analysis (below) shows strong relationships and effects, we do not know the direction of causality. We attempt to gain leverage on this question through in-depth interviews in Norway and the USA. Here, it is not only library users that are relevant. Clearly, the mere existence of a universalistic program attracting new users could gain the hypothesized effects.

As both a meeting place and a universal service institution, the public library seems to be a creator of social capital[6]. This is apparent from Cox *et al.*'s findings. The existence of the public library is important to people, both among users and non-users. It is also a meeting place where people to some extent interact with others, possibly creating social trust.

### Data and methods

Macro-level data are data on generalized trust from the World Values Survey (the third wave), which contains data on, trust from all over the world collected between 1999 and 2004 (World Values Survey, 2006). The data analyzed is from the thirty OECD countries because data on public library spending is available mostly for these countries (Table I for data sources). Further, we have conducted interviews with public library administrators (Boulder, Colorado; Castlerock, Colorado; and Tromsø), and studied the respective public library plans and budgets. The interviews took place November 2006 through January 2007.

This study builds upon a limited amount of data although several sources of data are utilized. The fact that little is known about this possible arena of social capital creation merits an exploratory qualitative approach. If it is true that public libraries basically offer the same services and are the same universal institutions all over, at least in the OECD countries, the selection of cases within this area should be of little importance. However, considering a possible distinction between public libraries in the USA and the Scandinavian countries because both are extremes ("outliers" in social science jargon) on the welfare state dimension, the cases for qualitative study have been selected from the USA and Norway. We have used two American cases trying to explore and account for some of the variation in library organizational models and the liberal/conservative divide in the USA. The selection of the three cases is not meant to be statistically representative, but give some basis for analytical (theoretical) generalization (Yin, 1989 for this concept). However, the main purpose for the study is to explore and develop the understanding of whether public libraries can generate generalized trust.

We start out by describing the main findings, investigating both the macro-level relationship between public library policy and generalized trust data, and the micro-level mechanisms potentially creating trust. The main question asked is what

Variable	Source <sup>a</sup>	Unit	N	Year	Correlation
Protestant religion (dummy)	Barrett (1982)	Per cent Protestants	30	1980	0.82**
Ethnic fractionalization	Alesina <i>et al</i> (2003)	Probability measure, 0-1	30	1979-2001	-0.19
Income inequality (gini index)	UNDP (2004)	0-100	29	2002	-0.37
National wealth	UNDP (2004)	GDP per capita in PPPs	30	2002	0.42*
Library spending	Libecon (2002)	Total expenditure per capita	30	2002	0.77**
Government effectiveness	Kaufmann <i>et al</i> (2006)	-2.5-2.5	30	2002	0.66**
Government impartiality	PRS Group (2007)	Probability measure, 0-1	30	2002	0.74**

**Note:** Level of significance at \*0.05 and \*\*0.001  
**Source:** <sup>a</sup>Except from Libecon (2004), all the data sources in addition to WVS data are taken from and found in Teorell *et al* (2007)

**Table I.**  
 Bivariate correlations  
 with generalized  
 social trust



are the most plausible mechanisms generating trust in the library setting. Is there any macro-level basis for claiming that the public library generates generalized trust? If so, is it the fact that people meet in the library that is important for generalized trust as according to the society-oriented understanding of social capital creation, or is it the universal character of the library institution that inspires trust?

### **Public library spending and generalized trust**

According to the World Values Survey, Third Wave, 1999-2004 (World Values Survey, 2006), Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland, together with The Netherlands are unique among the OECD countries in that more than half of the population in these countries think most people can be trusted[7]. For example, the percentages among the rest of European countries included in this study are much lower extending from 12.3 percent in Portugal to 37 percent in Switzerland. The Nordic countries are also the highest per capita spenders on public libraries within the OECD (Libecon, 2004). We find all the five Nordic countries among the top seven, with Denmark as the clear number one. The Danish per capita public library expenditure was € 66.25 in 2002, while the lowest amount was € 00.54 for Mexico. From these data it is clear that there is a strong correlation between library expenses and generalized trust. The correlation coefficient is as high as 0.77 (Table I).

If public libraries contribute to generalized trust, one would expect that high library expenses would increase social trust, and that this relationship would still hold after controlling for other independent variables. Studies on the origins of social capital have found different variables generating generalized trust. Independent variables finding support in both of two newer studies are Protestant traditions, quality of government variables, income inequality and ethnic fractionalization (Delhey and Newton, 2005; Rothstein and Stolle, forthcoming). We also include national wealth (GDP per capita), as it is likely that national wealth is related to both generalized trust and library spending.

The effect of Protestant traditions is explained by the observation that Protestant beliefs more than in other religions and churches, stress the importance of behaving trustworthy and having trusting attitudes towards others (Delhey and Newton, 2005, pp. 313-4). These beliefs are reinforced by the emphasis on human equality before God and the individual answerability to Him. Qualities of government variables measure the extent government institutions and services are considered impartial and just institutions. In addition, income equality and ethnic heterogeneity variables measuring social cleavages have been found to have effects.

### **Results of the multivariate analysis**

The bivariate correlations between the independent variables and generalized trust show that in addition to library spending, Protestant religion, institutional impartiality, institutional effectiveness and also national wealth have statistically significant relationships. These variables are included in the multivariate analysis. Since almost all of the independent variables are strongly correlated, they cannot be included in the same regression model more than two at a time due to multicollinearity problems (Delhey and Newton, 2005 for more on this problem). To simplify the output of the analysis and further reduce multicollinearity we use the interaction term of the two institutional variables rather than include the variables individually. This term



correlates with interpersonal trust at about the same level as its components (0.71). There are also ample theoretical reasons for doing this from an institutional perspective on generalized trust, arguing that governments that are both effective and impartial create most generalized trust (Kumlin and Rothstein, 2005; Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005; Rothstein and Stolle, forthcoming).

The multivariate analysis reveals that Protestant religion, library spending, and institutional effectiveness/impartiality, have effects on generalized trust (Table II, Model 1, Model 2, Model 3). The effect of national wealth is not statistically significant. Protestantism has the strongest effect in all models where it is included, 0.48, 0.57, and 0.73. The effects of library spending (0.39) and institutional effectiveness/impartiality (0.37) are also strong.

Since one cannot put all four or even three independent variables in the same regression equation, it is not possible to verify which of library spending and institutional effectiveness/impartiality have the strongest impact on generalized trust. However, when we run an equation without the exogenous Protestant religion variable (Model 4), the independent effect of library spending on generalized trust is significantly stronger than the effect of the institutional interaction variable.

What does this mean? One could argue that the results imply that the effect of public library spending on generalized trust in the OECD countries is bigger than the effect of having uncorrupt and effective institutions. The library spending variable is basically an indicator of the strength of the public library institution in a given country. The public library institution is founded on the idea of providing universal access to information, and as such being an impartial and effective public institution. In most studies the public library is found to be very highly regarded institution both regarding impartiality and efficiency. Much of the direct effect of the institutional interaction term disappears when confronted with library spending, but the effect is still significant. This means that the public library is a very important indicator of institutional impartiality and effectiveness. Much of the effect of the impartial and effective institution variable is an indirect effect that runs through the library spending variable. Therefore, to a great extent the library variable and the institutional variable tap the same phenomenon. This finding also suggests that the public library is a particularly important impartial public institution. While the library is an impartial institution and a street-level institution like the police and the judicial system, it is an institution that meets its patrons as equals and on their own terms more than most other public service institutions. Additionally, the public library could be considered an even more impartial public institution than the judicial system, in that it is more

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Protestant religion (dummy)	0.48* (2.51)	0.57*** (4.35)	0.73*** (6.30)	
Library spending per capita	0.39* (2.03)			0.54*** (3.61)
Interaction term institutional effectiveness/impartiality		0.37** (2.87)		0.36** (2.42)
National wealth			0.22 (1.86)	
R <sup>2</sup> (adjusted)	0.65	0.69	0.64	0.65

**Note:** Level of significance at \*0.05; \*\*0.01 and \*\*\*0.001 level

**Table II.** Effects on generalized trust. OLS-regression ( $\beta$  (T-value)),  $N = 30$

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associated with public sphere institutions outside the government such as the press and other civil society institutions.

In policy terms our findings mean that while Protestantism hardly is a variable that can be used as a policy instrument anymore, library spending and impartial and effective public institutions are. In many countries except perhaps in the highest spending countries of Denmark, Switzerland, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden, public library spending has a huge potential for increase. Thus, this apparently trust producing institutional variable can be an instrument for generating more generalized trust.

The problem of whether trust is effect or cause means that without time series data, the only way to know whether public libraries contribute to social trust is to study the micro-mechanisms where this is supposed to happen, that is, in the public libraries themselves. The findings so far suggest that this is not an either/or question. Protestantism is of course, an exogenous variable that cannot be caused by generalized trust levels around and after the year 2000. However, concerning library spending and the institutional variables, this might well be the case. It seems reasonable to suggest that it is a mutually reinforcing relationship between spending on public libraries, efficient and impartial institutions, and generalized trust. However, we do not really know if the public library is an important independent variable in causing general trust. In the following, possible trust-building micro-processes in the public library are explored.

The reasons for studying actual social trust generation mechanisms at work in the library are twofold: first, the question whether and how trust is created in the public library setting; second, the difficulty of relating to macro-processes that cannot be traced on the individual level (Popper, 1966; Weber *et al.*, 1978; Elster, 1989).

### **Meetings in the library**

Our first proposition is that meetings in public libraries create generalized trust, public libraries being a place where people of different categories (class, age, race, ethnicity, gender) meet. The meetings may range from informal low intensive meetings developing weak ties between people to formal high intensive meetings developing strong ties. The contact hypothesis does not in itself really distinguish between contact in private or public institutions (e.g., meeting someone in the grocery store vs meeting that same person in a library), but in our view it is reasonable to assume with socio-psychological research that contacts made on an equal footing in a public space like the library could have more positive consequences for social capital than more asymmetrical meetings in commercial spaces, where buying power is crucial. Equally, it is interesting to note that library leaders appear to view generating social capital in this way as a core responsibility – though they are more likely to call it “community building.”

It is in this regard important to distinguish between formal meetings that are high intensive and informal meetings that mostly are low intensive meetings. Formal meetings are arranged meetings, e.g. in the form of a computer literacy course for seniors set up by the library, meetings with authors in the library, or by the availability of free bookable meeting rooms for any group of individuals, a Girls’ Scout club or a local business. Informal meetings are situations where library users just meet when reading a newspaper, between the shelves when looking for a book, or when using a computer. Meetings between users and librarians are by definition formal, even when this form of interaction turns into a discussion about general social issues or personal problems that the user needs information about/help with.

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*Informal meetings in the library*

In general, the public library understood as a meeting place is not regarded as very important in the eyes of the interviewed library leaders (library directors and members of the leadership team), compared to the informational core activities in the library, the safety of the library as a place to be, and the universality of its services.

The interviewed library leaders maintain that the primary functions of the public library seem most important to most library users, but observe that people to some extent meet informally in the library, and that the driver behind the contact is the search for materials. However, most library leaders maintain that interaction between users in general is low, while others tend to raise this level somewhat, but all agree that frequent interaction takes place in the Children's Department:

People meet mostly in Children's, otherwise they keep to themselves, but they work side by side with others. People bring work with them to the library [...] High school students come to do their group work; here they have space (Library leader 1).

*Formal meetings in the library and outreach*

The library leaders tell in the interviews that user surveys inform them that it is the middle classes that visit the public library, not the rich and the poor. However, recent developments have made the library more welcoming to other groups as well. The advent of the Internet, electronic media and videos has made the user groups more varied. Contrary to popular opinion, not everybody has access to the Internet at home. It is also maintained that the pattern of middle-class library usage is becoming more varied. Some in this group leave the library, while the more educated part of the middle-class group increase their library use, and use it for creative purposes together with their children (Library leader 2).

According to the interviews, the point of outreach activities is to attract new user groups to the library. These are the distrustful groups:

It is the poor that need information, [earlier] we did not serve them, so we worked hard to bring in the under-represented; we tried to open up to ethnic groups and low income people, but no one came [...]. Third world people do not trust the government, they will not write down their names (Library leader 3).

The library is part of a structure they do not trust, and they will not come. Libraries have in many instances tried to solve this problem by hiring outreach librarians to initiate outreach programs, civic courses, English as a second language courses, native language courses, pre-literacy and literacy programs for children and more:

She [the outreach librarian] went into the neighborhoods to find them; in the classes ethnic groups talk with each other. This way, we brought in a lot more underprivileged people (Library leader 3).

These programs are described as successful. The conducting of library outreach activities vary a lot by quantity, and by type of policy instrument between the three libraries studied. Both Boulder Public Library (BPL) and Douglas County Public Libraries (Castlerock, Colorado) actively employ outreach as a trust building and user-mobilization strategy, although in very different ways. Library leaders in all three libraries believe that getting people to use the library creates generalized trust, and especially attracting groups that underuse library services. In Tromsø Library,

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outreach activities have been more or less neglected since the 1990s mainly because of a tight library budget (Library leader 4; Library leader 5)[8]. Outreach activities are, however, part of the library long-term plan (Tromsø kommune, 2006). BPL and Douglas County Public Library District (DCPLD) are among the wealthiest in Colorado and in the USA. Among public libraries in Colorado with a service area population larger than 40,000, BPL (\$59.34 per capita) and DCPLD (\$58.18 per capita) are second and third in total library expenditures per capita in 2005 (LRS, 2007). On the state level total expenditures per capita were \$39.29, while the national average was \$30.49 in 2004 (Chute *et al.*, 2006).

In BPL, the main outreach strategy has been to go into the neighborhoods to make contact with low income groups, mainly Hispanic immigrants, to promote library services. Compared to BPL, DCPLD relies on a very different outreach strategy. Here, an abundance of meeting rooms are provided and actively marketed towards the community, towards businesses, voluntary associations, and individuals (Library leader 6). In addition, newcomer households to the district are targeted and given library cards by using Geographical Information Systems to get an overview of neighborhoods which are new and where less people have library cards. This strategy has been very successful in that 85 percent of the Douglas county households had cards in 2006, while only 51 percent had library cards in 1996. One of the reasons this strategy has been adopted in Douglas county as opposed to Boulder is that Douglas county has been growing extraordinarily fast as a result of Denver urban sprawl, and it is wealthy people that have moved in and there has so far been little need for activities designed for specific groups, although children and teens have been given special attention. Also a bookmobile is used in areas with few library cards.

The difference in outreach approaches is reflected in that BPL's 2006 budget was 36.5 percent higher on programs and outreach than in Douglas county (\$563,763 compared to \$358,205), while the population in Boulder City (97,467 in 2004) is less than half of Douglas County's (239,166 in 2004). The policies to attract new groups that underuse library services are grounded in the fact that libraries think this is part of their mission; public libraries are important for people, and create community feeling and trust.

### *Discussion*

People meet informally in the public library. However, from our limited qualitative data it is questionable whether this interaction in itself is enough to create social trust. The contact seems mostly small and fragmented. Meetings in the Children's Departments between parents, and between children, seem the most promising among the informal meetings. The public library shows potential as an arena for contact for other specific groups as well. The library seems to function as a first approach to a new environment for immigrants. The library may be the only place where the homeless can meet others on what they may consider more equal terms. For people in general it is more doubtful whether the low intensive meetings the library offers, contribute significantly to the creation of generalized trust. Of course, library users see and meet others, but according to our interviews this contact is not so profoundly different from contacts made in other arenas where people meet in low-intensive situations, in shopping malls, at bus stops, etc. Therefore, it is perhaps not obvious that contact in the library should create social trust more than in other informal situations.

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Formalized meetings, in the form of library arrangements, programs directed at specific groups, the provision of meeting rooms, and the distribution of library cards, rely on the premise that by getting people into the library this will create community. In attracting vulnerable groups such as newcomers, this seems a powerful strategy. Immigrants find information, learn about their new community, and are treated like all other users. And, as said in the interviews, children are perhaps the most important group, a group where patterns of trust still are in formation.

Meeting activity does not by itself seem to make the public library into a generalized trust factory. Why are people attracted to the library in the first place? For the library to generate generalized trust something else must be added. Let us now turn to the second proposition claiming that it is the universalistic services provided in public libraries that create trust, that is, the institution in itself is the *locus* of trust.

### **Do libraries create trust?**

Public library spending has a big impact on generalized trust. The regression coefficient is highly significant, but the results of the multivariate analysis do not say anything about the causal direction. High generalized trust can cause high library expenditure. Therefore, this paper has turned to investigating micro-processes to unravel the causal mechanism. The second proposition, that the library creates trust as a place where people meet, finds support for formal meetings/arrangements, while the evidence is more limited for the library as an informal arena for meetings. For specific vulnerable groups our interviews show that the library is an important space, but for people in general the library is not a significant informal meeting place compared to other places for low-intensive meetings like shopping malls and bus stops. Formalized meetings, on the other hand, designed in the form of programs directed at specific underprivileged groups such as immigrants and children, the provision of meeting rooms, and the distribution of library cards, seem to contribute highly in generating generalized trust.

The attraction of the socially vulnerable to the library is a way of extending the universality of the library to everyone, making the library more universal. The basis for this work is the high trust in the public library institution. It is the widespread trust in the institution that makes the library's work for extending this trust relevant and important. Trust creates trust. New library policies built on the results of former policies create more trust. Without the high trust in the library institution it would be very difficult to attract even marginal non-trusting groups, and to increase the universality of the library. The universality of the library is first and foremost grounded in the library information services and their quality, the fact that it is considered a very safe place to visit, and that it is for everyone. The main finding in this paper is that the public library, by being an institution where everybody is welcome regardless of social status, is likely to be a generator of generalized trust, and that the main way the public library can increase societal generalized trust is by making itself more accessible to new groups of users. Libraries probably matter for the creation of social capital, but more replicate findings and case studies of user attitudes and behavior are needed, and survey data from several countries is also important.

Generalized trust means that individuals trust most people, people in general. The ultimate test of generalized trust is the trust in diverse others. Society-centered social capital studies have lately focused on the relationship between diversity and trust, and

conclude that racially and ethnically diverse populations drive down trust; trust is neither created in voluntary associations nor in informal neighborhood settings. On the one hand, these findings are not conclusive, and on the other hand, other settings and types of contact may still be conducive to the formation of generalized trust. Given certain preconditions (equal group status within the situation; common goals; inter-group cooperation; and the support of authorities, law, or custom (Pettigrew, 1998, p. 65)) to the nature of contact, social psychological research supports that contact generates generalized trust. Within both settings for contact and among universalistic welfare institutions, the public library is one of the very few, if any, that can come close to fulfilling the criteria for creating trust. And, as shown in this paper, there are good reasons for claiming that the library institution creates generalized trust through attracting diverse people. It is when the standards of contact are fulfilled that it is possible for people to meet on the same terms and trust each other. From an institutionalist point of view this might be evidence enough that the public library and, by implication, public institutions in general create generalized trust, if they function according to standards of quality of government involving impartiality and efficiency.

### Notes

1. Social capital has been defined as consisting of trust, norms of reciprocity, and networks (Putnam, 1993). Generalized trusting attitudes express the core of social capital. It is trust extended to people in general that is the crucial component of social capital. Networks can rely on within group relationships promoting particularized trust.
2. This distinction is similar to the one between bridging social capital and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000).
3. See Kumlin and Rothstein (2005), Rothstein and Uslaner (2005), Uslaner and Brown (2005), Rothstein and Stolle (forthcoming) for arguments suggesting that universalistic programs as such contribute to social trust.
4. For an extensive review of the social capital and public libraries literature (Vårheim, 2007).
5. This paragraph draws in part upon Vårheim (2007).
6. In addition, library services are universal in two broader meanings. Library services are open to people in every phase of life. People receive, e.g. child benefits only for a limited period, when they have children under a specific age. Secondly, public libraries operate according to universalistic principles in advanced industrialized democracies, in Nordic welfare states as well as in the USA.
7. The survey question in the 2000 World Value Survey was: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?" (World Values Survey, 2006).
8. Compared to the other big Norwegian cities, public library expenditure in Tromsø was significantly lower in 2004 (latest available year) (Tromsø kommune, 2006, p. 27). The figure was 75 percent of the average spending for these cities.

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