More than a Library?: Urban Poverty and an Exploratory Look at the Role of a Neighborhood Institution

By Carolyn Ly, Yale University
Introduction by Waverly Duck, University of Pittsburgh

ABSTRACT

Libraries have traditionally tended to be one of the few institutionally provided public resources for local residents in poor, urban, neighborhoods. This paper presents findings from the exploratory phase of an ongoing research project which examines, through participant observation, the "value" of a public library in a poor urban neighborhood. To what extent do residents make use of traditional library resources? What alternative functions does the library serve in the neighborhood? The findings collected have suggested that the library as a social space contains value to the immediate neighborhood in ways beyond physical utility; it holds a significant symbolic value or meaning to local residents. These findings suggest that within impoverished urban neighborhoods, locally oriented public institutions need to be recognized as fulfilling a variety of unintended functions for the surrounding community.

ARTICLE INTRODUCTION

When I read the call for papers for the special issue dedicated to the life and work of Joe Cytrybaum, I instantly thought of the work of Carolyn Ly. Carolyn Ly is a graduate student with whom I have worked for over three years. Like Joe, she values access to resources for children and is deeply concerned about the growing inequality in our inner city neighborhoods. Joe was committed to justice, a man who valued creative expression through spoken word and poetry. It followed naturally that he would be dedicated to finding artistic opportunities for inner city kids. I believe Ly's project is a fitting tribute to him and is representative of his community work and the ideals he fostered so passionately.

Ly's article presents findings from an exploratory ethnographic study that examines, through participant observation, the value and use of a public library in a poor urban neighborhood. Observing the disturbing trend of library closures due to budget shortfalls in the worst depression since the 1930s, Ly saw that the closures were occurring in predominantly poor urban neighborhoods. Since she had volunteered at numerous libraries growing up, she understood the changing landscape of their use due to information technology. Though impacted by the economic decline, the library Ly was studying, with its embedded rules of quiet and civility, continued to be a safe learning space for children and a practical resource for job searches and access to information. Ly's observations of the library teach us that the needs of libraries and communities are one and the same. Libraries are safe, accessible, and very useful community institutions where all are welcome, all of which are monumentally important in troubled urban spaces.

Challenging provincial ideas about the importance of library spaces, Ly's goal was to show that libraries have a special utility beyond book circulation. Ironically, Ly's library site almost closed due to budget cuts during the course of this study. While she doesn't mention this in the paper, she played a significant role in saving the library, attending community meetings and participating in the collection of over eight hundred signatures to save the library. Thankfully, the community won. One of my proudest moments was watching her question the mayor using data from her study, showing the library's versatile and overlooked use. It is in this spirit that she is reminiscent of Joe.

It is my sincerest hope that Joe, who was on the frontline of community activism, would appreciate a project that personifies opportunities for all children, especially those in poor urban communities. His work is a constant reminder of the importance of providing educational capital and resource opportunities for children. A man whose work has impacted children in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago is a shining example of the role of a public intellectual. Ly and I celebrate his life and admire his work and actions. I believe Joe Cytrybaum's work with young people through artistic expression is an example of a legacy we all can appreciate and imitate. His contributions will truly be missed, and we will lead by his example.

Ly, who is in the beginning stages of this research project, graciously welcomes comments. Please send comments to Carolyn.ly@yale.edu.

As a result of the American economic crisis, local policy and decision-makers across the United States are being forced to find new ways to spread already thin budgets. Consequently, public resources such as local libraries, community centers, and arts and recreational programs, are often considered as possible services to reduce or eliminate. Comparably, this issue, particularly regarding libraries, has been of interest to British scholars for quite some time, as the role of libraries and their relevance and resourcefulness to surrounding neighborhoods has been contested in similar situations where library closures occurred due to budget cuts and economic constraints. The consideration of library service reduction and closure as options to alleviate budget constraints have been a relatively recent occurrence in the United States which may partially explain the limited research examining the role of libraries in American scholarship. During the course of this research, the city considered closing the local neighborhood library which was being observed, allowing ethnographic documentation of the process of the threatened closure, and the subsequent response by library patrons and local residents.

This article presents findings from the exploratory phase of an ongoing research project which examines, through participant observation the "value" of a public library in a poor urban neighborhood. This study examines: To what extent do residents make use of traditional library resources? What alternative functions does the library serve in the neighborhood? The goal of this project is to understand the multifaceted use of local urban libraries in an era of economic decline in many of these communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The American Library Association, Communication and Information Studies, along with Institutions such as the Institute of Museum and Library Services are, not surprisingly, generally the leading proponents in the United States in regards to library research. Urban Studies, Sociology, Human Ecology, Urban Planning, and Social Policy disciplines, stand to gain valuable insight on ways to utilize publicly supported social institutions such as libraries and community centers to help ameliorate social inequalities and the lack of resources within highly concentrated poor urban areas. Above and beyond the purely use-value resources of the library, this paper will present empirical evidence which supports the existing evidence that the local library not only plays a role in providing traditional resources, but additionally it has significant symbolic value attributed to its locality, or localness. In examining library closures in the UK, Proctor and Simmons (2000: 32) found that, with regards to how people feel about libraries, "It offers a resource, which, because it is local and belongs to them makes people feel valued." They go on to elaborate on the relevance of close-proximities, "Also because it is local, the local library helps give people a sense of identity and community" (2000: 32). Furthermore, Proctor, Usherwood, and Sobczyk (1996: 37) examined the effect of library closures on patrons during an employee strike in the city of Sheffield in the UK. Within their study they found evidence that there is "very high value placed on the use of the library as a social resource, particularly in communities with higher than average incidences of social and economic deprivation." Most recently, Becker et al.'s (2010:26) findings similarly support these assertions regarding marginalized communities by identifying that among those who visit the library, some of the most frequent patrons include the working poor, which they identify as those who earn 100-200 percent of the federal poverty guideline, women, and people of mixed race.[1] In one of the first and largest national studies involving public libraries, Becker et al.'s (2010) research – while primarily focuses on computer use and internet access – additionally provides key insight on more general library data that has, until recently, been scarce and on a smaller scale. These findings, in conjunction with the longer-standing body of research regarding libraries, shape the existing scientific knowledge on the role and various uses of public libraries.

One interesting finding that is specifically pertinent during the economic crisis is how the local library as a social space of existence plays a role within the larger community. More specifically, part of Proctor, Usherwood, and Sobczyk's (1996: 38) research findings indicate that a library's presence in a local community may have significant impact on local retailers and other businesses since libraries and library visits bring people to those areas more frequently. Additionally, regarding the educational aspects and contributions of the library, their report highlights that in communities in which access to "higher and further education" is less available, there is a "high potential for extended educational provision through the library service" (23, 37). Similarly, Becker et al. (2010:4) highlight that libraries are supportive of furthering the educational aspirations of patrons by providing supplementary tools including internet access and computer word processing programs, which are necessary for successful academic achievement. Supporting this claim, they provide statistics that assert that about 32.5 million people utilized technological resources at the library "to help them achieve educational goals" (6). Additionally, they found that 42 percent of the respondents between the ages of 14-18 did schoolwork on public library computers (6). The relevance of libraries as significant to their respective communities due to "wide ranging social value" beyond book circulation (Proctor & Simmons 2000:25; Bampton 1999; Proctor 1999(a); 1999(b)) is supported by the existing, primarily British, literature on public libraries and the more recent work completed in the United States (Becker et al. 2010).

Locality and Perceptions: Neighborhoods, Community, and Associated Identities

Inherent in examining the function, utility, and role of a local library, is the need to define what is meant by the term "local library." While there are some minor variations, most public library systems within the United States consist generally of a main lo-

cation, usually spatially larger with more resources, supplemented by smaller branch locations. Depending on state and municipal administrative policies the geographic lay-out of the libraries may vary. For the context of this paper, it is relevant to know that the local library being studied is in a small city which has its own city-administered and budgeted library system consisting of one main branch along with smaller branches located in various neighborhoods. The term "local library," in its broadest use within this paper, implies the immediately surrounding area and the socially accepted definition of the neighborhood which the library is a part of. [2]

An additional aspect in defining locality is the broader discussion and contextualization of the varying neighborhoods or ecological delineations within the city. Many sociological scholars who have interests in urban poverty and inequalities have attempted to define the locality of neighborhoods in varying ways in hopes of obtaining more accurate or appropriate measures for researching various social phenomena related to urban settings, and the mechanisms of poverty and inequalities which exist within these urban areas. What becomes apparent within academic disciplines such as Sociology and among varying cross-disciplinary literature is the lack of parsimony in the conceptual and working definition of "neighborhood."

The division of social spaces into neighborhood segments has been done in varying ways, ranging from techniques that have divided neighborhoods by utilizing administrative units such as census tracks and postal codes – the somewhat arbitrary nature of this approach has led to the questioning of the validity of the research technique. In 2001, Coulton et al. conducted research in which they asked residents to define neighborhood units by illustrating their perceived boundaries on a geographic neighborhood map. The results from their study suggest that the differences "between researcher and resident-defined neighborhoods are a possible source of bias in studies of neighborhood effects" (371). In support of their findings, they also emphasize that researchers have begun to acknowledge that *residential identification* (emphasis added) of neighborhood boundaries might be "more closely representative of the neighborhood construct" (Coulton et al 2001:372; Burton, Price-Spratlen, and Spencer, 1997; Elliott and Huizinga, 1990; Korbin and Coulton 1997; Meyer and Jencks, 1989; Taylor, Gottfredson, and Brower, 1984). Other research endeavors which have attempted to address and circumvent issues of arbitrary delineation of neighborhoods have created varying research techniques in ascribing boundaries based on a variety factors.[3] The newer approaches have been employed and developed in hopes of more appropriately capturing how location-specific aspects – so called "neighborhood effects" – may shape the social life of individuals. Even with the existing discrepancies regarding the varying ways of defining neighborhood boundaries within urban areas, the research findings, while somewhat varied, taken as a whole provide an unmistakable statement regarding how exceptionally salient locally-oriented and available social structures are to their neighborhoods. Therefore, while there is still debate on which methods of delineating neighborhood boundaries are most valid and appropriate, neighborhood effect studies have highlighted the crucial need to recognize the power and potential of local neighborhood resources for poor urban areas within larger city units, regardless of how we may choose to define neighborhood areas. Considering the challenges of conceptually creating a general definition of neighborhood while acknowledging that varying research questions regarding neighborhoods may have differentially appropriate ways to examine their respective questions, this analysis will cull Maria Small and Kathy Newman's (2001) discussion regarding neighborhoods in the context of urban poverty. They propose four separate but complimentary dimensions regarding neighborhoods (31):

> *(a)* as a social space, *(b)* a set of relationships, *(c)* a set of institutions, *(d)* a symbolic unit (Chaskin, 1997); or what we may think of neighborhoods alternatively as *(a)* sites, *(b)* perceptions, *(c)* networks, and *(d)* cultures. (Burton et al. 1997)

Loosely considering these four conceptual dimensions of neighborhoods may enable researchers to work-through contradicting theoretical frameworks and research findings regarding neighborhood effects and mechanisms. More recently, Patricia Hill Collins' (2010) discussion of "community" provides a new contextual way of thinking of neighborhoods which also fits within Small and Newman's dimensional conceptions. Calling for the consideration of the concept of "community" as a political construct, Collins presents arguments regarding the utility of conceptualizing "community" as a political construct and emphasizes how this re-conceptualization may influence newer possibilities regarding inequality-centered research. Within her discussion she states:

> In everyday knowledge, people often use the term community interchangeably with concepts of neighborhood. This points to the place-based underpinnings of the construct and how community is central to group identification (2010:10).

What can be inferred from the somewhat reciprocal nature of the take-for-granted understandings of neighborhood and community as interchangeable is the idea that varying conceptions of neighborhoods and communities both play a role in identity. Similarly, David J. Harding (2009) highlights the role of neighborhood as a form of social identity within his research.[4] In considering the varying definitions and conceptual approaches regarding neighborhoods, an examination of the context of use, and the possible implications regarding the interrelated-role of neighborhoods with identity claims or associations more generally, is necessary. As in the case of West Branch Library and the Midville neighborhood, examined in this paper, the concept of neighborhood therefore is both descriptive in making sense of socially understood boundaries, and also holds meaning as a political construct, in terms of its interchangeability

with the concept of community (Collins, 2010), when people make claims to institutional resources such as local public libraries. Often neighborhoods within cities must take part in battles which involve "power relations" utilizing Collins' words (2010:7), between political institutions and marginalized communities, but additionally, between marginalized groups which reside in de facto segregated neighborhoods which have dealt with persistent inequalities. What is imperative and relevant to take from this very brief and selectively pointed discussion of the ongoing, somewhat discordant and tangent-prone body of literature which deals with the umbrella term of "neighborhood," is the particular discussions which enlighten the case of the library.

A germane starting point for the case of the West Branch Library is the identification and discussion of two broad groupings regarding models which address neighborhood effects mechanisms. Research oriented towards answering questions regarding neighborhood effects mechanisms seeks to examine how varying structural level neighborhood-based social phenomena function to create unintended consequences for individual residents; the two broad model categorizations are identified as socialization mechanisms and instrumental mechanisms (Kathy Newman and Rebekah Massengill, 2001:32-35). By fusing strands of research previously mentioned, this paper aims to explore how instrumental mechanisms such as truncated social space and resources may contribute to, and influence, the ways in which the library is valued and perceived or understood within the context of the local neighborhood. These strands of research help to frame the possible ways residents understand the role of the local library, and help to enlighten how the next phase of this exploratory research project, along with other research endeavors, may proceed. More specifically, during the threat of closure, the value and possible meaning of the local library was brought to light – illustratively speaking to the significance and validity of claims of research which emphasize instrumental mechanisms within poor urban areas.

The Significance of the West Branch Library and the Midville Neighborhood

West Branch Public Library is located in the Midville neighborhood of the city of Jamesburg, in the northeastern United States.[5] Midville could arguably be designated as a "ghetto" in Doug Massey and Nancy Denton's (1998) terms. Residents of Midville and other neighborhoods in Jamesburg struggle to find jobs that can provide a living-wage. Jamesburg is a previously industrial city in the contemporary, post-industrial world, and has few jobs to offer.[6] Although Cass College is a large presence in Jamesburg and provides thousands of jobs, many people who reside outside Jamesburg compete with city residents for both unionized and non-unionized positions. As of the 2000 United States Census, Midville is located within one of the poorest neighborhood areas in Jamesburg.[7] Median household income in the Midville neighborhood was between $22,000-24,000 (in 1999 dollars) for those who resided near the West Branch Library, and about 25% of individuals and 15.5-17.7% of families, of the area were living below the poverty level, well above national averages. The Midville area is a concentrated African American neighborhood. Of all the neighborhood library locations in Jamesburg, West Branch Library is surrounded by the highest percentage of residents who are African American.

While statistics from the 2000 United States Census are dated, ethnographic observation conducted for this project seemingly supports the descriptive statistics provided in 2000. Accordingly, the 2010 Census data will likely continue to support the relevance of the descriptive characteristics provided in this paper. Additionally, there is evidence supporting the likelihood that similar descriptive trends will continue. Besides the ethnographic observations that the Midville neighborhood continues to be highly racially segregated from other areas within Jamesburg, the concentration of people who are African American in the Midville neighborhood has been an evident trend over the last few decades. Between the 1990 and 2000 Census, through a marked and visible process of gentrification, there was an increased concentration of de facto racial segregation, as the percentage of people who were African American in Midville remained relatively constant (currently at 86.4-96.8%) while other areas in Jamesburg which previously had higher percentages of African American residents in 1990 decreased.

What becomes evident in the brief overview of descriptive statistics and recent historical trends of the Midville neighborhood is the importance of recognizing the possible role that unique structural factors play in understanding the library as an especially important social space and resource to the local residents of a highly marginalized community.[8] In particular, the extreme systematic ghettoization of Midville over time may have significantly influenced the ways in which the community understands allocated resources, socially constructed boundaries and, accordingly, the significance of having a public space such as the West Branch Library within those perceived boundaries.[9] Accordingly, this descriptive overview in context with the aforementioned literature and theoretical insight provided by varying disciplines and lines of research, all suggest support for the assertion that marginalized and impoverished areas, which deal with constraints such as limited resources, have an even greater stake in maintaining a local neighborhood library. Local libraries are relevant for both traditional, and possibly even more importantly, non-traditional resources, which are arguably especially crucial in impoverished areas such as the Midville neighborhood in providing useful resources, and additionally, helping to construct self-worth and neighborhood identity. By bringing together the seemingly disparate bodies of research, one can quickly observe the positive and ameliorating possibilities an institutionally-supported local resource such as the library may have on poor and marginalized neighborhoods. Additionally, this paper will present empirical findings which reinforce these assertions.

METHODOLOGY

The initial methodological research approach of this study was to collect exploratory data regarding the role of the library within a poor urban neighborhood via ethnographic methods. Of the multiple branch locations within the Jamesburg library system, the Midville neighborhood's local West Branch location was selected based on the context of theoretical sampling.[10] In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson (1987) identifies that the concentration of poverty in inner-city urban areas leads to the relative greater disadvantage of those residents.[11] Additionally, he emphasized varying structural changes which have occurred since 1970 which are descriptively characteristic of the city of Jamesburg. Wilson's findings are further utilized to theoretically inform the selection of the library branch location and corresponding neighborhood within the smaller context of the city of Jamesburg; West Branch was chosen because of its location within a neighborhood that has experienced an observed trend of increasingly highly concentrated residents who are primarily African American with high rates of poverty and working poor in comparison to other branch locations situated in neighborhoods within Jamesburg.

This paper seeks to examine broadly the role of the library as a social institution and the specific type(s) of function(s) a local library fulfills. During non-routine visits to the library, shorthand field notes were recorded and were immediately extended and transcribed after each visit to the library.[12] Field visits were additionally varied by the duration of time of each visit; visits were made on various days and times to ensure that observation of library utilization were made during a variety of circumstances, i.e. during after school and non-after school hours, on weekdays and weekends, and on days with various weather conditions. Some visits were very brief (30-45 minutes), typical of regular library patrons who pop into the library to utilize the computer, and others lasted for longer durations (up to 3 hours), typical of patrons doing homework, researching, or just passing the time. These field visits provided key insight regarding the varying functions and utility of the library through observational participation, which previously had been sparsely examined by researchers outside of library and communications studies. Furthermore, the ethnographic documentation of the process of contestation to the threat of library closure additionally gives valuable exploratory insight into the relevance of the library as a local institution and possible symbolically-valued resource.

The library is an institutionally supported free public space and since it is public, there are no *physical* barriers to getting access, however researchers who practice ethnography by following the observing participant method refer to access or "getting in" as an acceptance by, and a close relationship with, research subjects (Anderson, 2001: 16005).[13] The implications of the particular inquiries during the initial phase of this project is that the type of access which was necessary is different than the style of "observing participant" ethnographies which utilize "thick description" (Geertz:1973) and are prevalent and widely accepted within contemporary sociological urban ethnography studies.[14] In contrast, this research endeavor aimed to explore the practical use and function of the social space of the West Branch Public Library – that is the unit of analysis was the *library space* and its *utility*, which could be observed without building close relationships with the library patrons.

The intentions of observing through participation at the library raised concerns about how the researcher would achieve a status of a regular library patron. More specifically, it was vital to be able to visit the library and observe library use as a patron, collecting empirical data as an observing participant of the *social space and utility* of the library, and ultimately, to blend in with the other patrons. As a library patron the researcher was conspicuously dissimilar to most of the library's other patrons who were predominantly African American. West Branch Library and the neighborhood of Midville are located within walking distance of the Cass College Campus whose student body is predominantly White, yet arguably significantly diverse in comparison to the racial make-up of the Midville neighborhood and West Branch Library patrons who are predominantly African American. However, Cass College students do not utilize West Branch as a resource as the College has its own library resources, and additionally, the main branch of the Jamesburg public library system is located equally as close to the campus as West Branch Library, has more desired resources for college students to borrow (such as current DVD's and music), and is considered as being located in a more desirable and accessible area to students. Due to the non-existent, or infrequent at best, presence of non-resident, non-African Americans at West Branch, the researcher's presence was initially quite noticeable. Yet, over the course of the study, while reading, taking field notes, and working on the computers, the librarians became more familiar, and often engaged the researcher in small talk. The combination of visiting the library more than a few times, while simultaneously engaging in library life in a similar manner to other regular library patrons, and obtaining a library card, which you must have proof of Jamesburg residency to obtain, enabled the researcher to be recognized as part of the library community by the "authorities" of the library – the librarians. Through their acceptance, they assisted the researcher in becoming part of the social space of the library; their treatment indicated to other regular library patrons that the researcher was "in."[15]

FINDINGS

The West Branch Library, a one-story brick building, has been a part of the Midville neighborhood since 1969. The all brick building is located in the middle of a strip mall known as "Midville Plaza," which also includes a variety of shops and offices. To the left of the strip mall is "G-Mart," a discount grocer, to the right, and also within the premises of the plaza parking lot, is the "Holy Testament" Church, both in separate, stand-alone buildings. A school and playground are located directly behind the plaza. The retail

and office spaces within the Midville Plaza range from high-use to currently vacant and are representative of the surrounding neighborhood's wide-ranging mix of varying conditions – new residential housing areas to dilapidated abandoned houses or corner stores bustling with constant customers to neighborhood residents hanging out on desolate streets with boarded up stores no longer occupied.

The West Branch Library is often bustling with children and teenagers who show up by foot from their local neighborhood homes and schools during peak after-school hours. However, in terms of consistent presence of patronage, the library has a constantly fluctuating characteristic; outside of the peak after-school hours (and even occasionally among those hours) it has the same characteristic mix of high use and abandonment as the rest of the strip mall of which it is part. At any given time you could easily walk into a packed library full of kids, adults and seniors, or on a nice day, into a completely empty library consisting of only staff and/or volunteers sitting at the circulation desk. These finding address indirectly the role that time and weather, as well as school and library schedules play in library attendance. Two contrasting excerpts from my field notes during the peak after school hours exemplify this:

> **Field note:**
> 3:38PM- The weather is amazing (sunny and 60's with a light breeze) it feels like the first nice day of spring. Upon entering it looks as if the library is completely empty with the exception of the two library workers sitting at the front desk. After a minute of settling in, it becomes noticeable that there is one person in the library. It is the young pre-teen boy that has been in the library before and he is inquiring about the same things –looking for books and searching online for information on starting his own business. He is wandering around looking for books on his own. He eventually seeks help again from a librarian on how to find books about "starting a business."
>
> The library is pretty busy today, its 2:45 and the entire back computer area is full with teenagers and others are sitting at the work tables and talking. There must be at least 15 people here…3:20, the children's computer area is starting to fill up; there are 6 boys crowded around three computers, and two other boys are sitting at the nearby tables talking. A man enters with a little girl and signs her in with the librarians to use the children's computer area while he reads a magazine in the reading area designated for adults.

The Neighborhood Library as an Available, Safe, Local, Public Space

The lack of consistency in presence of library patronage should not be taken as indication to the level of utility that the library provides or as indication of the amount of relevance it has for the local community. Midville residents also have the opportunity to visit the library and attend library-sponsored classes and workshops on a range of topics including informational meetings regarding mortgage foreclosures, GED and homework help, Resume How-to, children's Valentine's Day card-making craft event, and Preschool story time. As previously mentioned and observed through field visits, patrons of the library may visit it for short durations of time and spontaneously, hence, part of the value of the library is based in the basic premise and knowledge of its *existence* and the ability to utilize it at will. Somewhat inherent within this acceptance of the library's function, is the belief or view that the library is a safe place to spend time because it is the only consistently supervised public space available to residents. In addition to the West Branch Library being a source for reading materials, internet access, computing functions, informal and formal meeting space, and educational purposes, visiting the field as an observing participant enabled the collection of ethnographic data which illustrated the ways the library is also utilized for informal childcare, and as an available local space which was trusted to be safe. During observations, parents frequently would enter the library with slightly older children and sign them in to use a computer in the children's' computer area. They would then leave the library to return later, at times with purchases made from other parts of the plaza, informally utilizing the library as childcare.

Many field notes collected from library visits were marked by the constantly changing and flexible landscape of the social space within the library. A review of the data revealed that on longer visits, experiences changed as the context of library users and uses changed, at times it was extremely quiet while at other times there was a consistently low hum of whispered voices socializing and interacting. Patrons would come and go, during brief visits to utilize the free internet access on one of the library computers, use the restroom, "just to hang out,"[16] check the time, browse a national or specialized paper during a work break, or to check for new fiction and exchange a brief greeting with one of the librarians and/or volunteers. On a few occasions some patrons would quite literally walk into the library, look around as if looking to see if a particular person was around, and then walk out. During longer visits, patrons were observed utilizing the library space to study, hold informal meetings, do homework, utilize the computer for games and word processing functions, and to socialize.

Another event, which occurred during exploratory field work, and which supports the suggestion that the local library functions as, and is generally considered, an available safe space, was a shooting outside of the library in the parking lot between the library and church. The shooting occurred shortly before a field visit and interestingly, even with the occurrence, everything seemed "normal" within the library (with the exception of the main entrance being locked upon arrival) and it was not immediately evident that anything had happened until the police arrived and began talking about the shooting. The police and library workers had an exchange speculating what kind of gun might have been used during the shooting based on the bullet casings which were found. The exchange was loud enough to be heard even though they were at least 20 feet

away. The children's computer section was just as close to them and also within earshot. My field notes highlighted that there was no effort made to hide or obscure the fact that there had been a shooting incident from library patrons, which included young children, who may not have been around during the event. This assertion is not a critique of the adults' behavior; in contrast, it is emphasized due to it's suggestive nature regarding the implications towards the relationship the children in this neighborhood might have to violence: close proximity and/or relatively frequent exposure to violent events such as these which might contribute to the normalization of violence, and accordingly, provides additional insight on possible socialization mechanisms often studied in neighbor effects research.

"There were at least two shots, I thought it was popcorn at first but then a bunch of kids came running into the library" the library worker, who in future field visits was identified as a young volunteer, stated while describing the shooting to the officers. This quote demonstrates that during times of violent occurrences, local children turn to the library as a safe social space.[17] Furthermore, after the shooting, library patrons continued to utilize the library as they normally would, while the library staff regulated the entrance to the library via maintenance of the locked doors and visually assessing all patrons before allowing entrance. Within Midville, West Branch has become one of the few, if not only, safe public indoor spaces where anyone may go to and be at without question. This is especially significant to the community because there are currently no alternative indoor or outdoor multiuse places or spaces that offer the same valuable resource to the Midville neighborhood. Up until 2002, a large building directly across the street from the library nicknamed "the U House"[18] operated as a community center and "safe public space" for the Midville residents. "Safe," as defined by several people in the community, meant a place with low incidences of violence, but also a space within the community where crossing boundaries between adjacent neighborhoods without the threat of violence became possible. The social phenomenon of constrained geographic space in disadvantaged neighborhoods is illustrated most relevantly by David J. Harding's discussion of his research finding regarding two poor areas in Boston:

> Violence in these areas reinforces the neighborhood as a form of social identity, restricts adolescent boys' pool of potential friends, structures their use of geographical space, and leads younger adolescent boys to greater interaction with older adolescents and young adults on the street. (2009: 446)

Constrained social spaces consequently also truncate and limit what resources are accessible within the boundaries of the neighborhood. Similarly, with the closing of the 'U' House in 2002, the West Branch library became the only accessible public neighborhood resource. It continues to fulfill multiple functions, and accordingly, important roles for the surrounding communities' residents.

An Unexpected Threat: Neighborhood Boundaries and Claims for a Local Library

Early in the process of conducting fieldwork, which took place during the mists of the economic crisis, the mayor of the city of Jamesburg, Charles Espisito had mentioned to a local newspaper that the closing of West Branch Library was being considered as a possible option to fund a predicted budget gap for the city's next fiscal budget. Midville residents, West Branch's loyal patrons, and some residents from the wider Jamesburg area made efforts to "Save West" and prevent the library from being closed through community organizing and mobilization efforts. These efforts included a petition which garnered support of over 800 local residents within a few days, and a significant physical presence of supporters at the Mayor's public fiscal budget meeting. The community members who rallied to keep West Branch open demonstrated the varying ways that local residents value the library by signing a petition which stated:

> West has functioned as a community center since the Midville Community ['U'] House closed its doors in 2002…closing down West would add further insult to our already injured community that is struggling to heal. Furthermore, closing down West will definitely contribute to increased youth violence and crime, as the library is one of the few safe havens for our youth.

The petition utilized language that emphasized the significance of the library as an available, safe, local, public space and additionally alludes to the symbolic meaning given to the library by highlighting that residents would be "insulted" if another institutionally supported public resource such as the 'U' house was taken away.[19] Much of this same rhetoric was repeated at the Mayor's budget meeting. The following are selected excerpts from the field notes on the budget meeting:

> **Field note:**
> The room is packed and there are people occupying all the chairs and standing along the sides against the walls. Arriving early helped to provide a seat but hard copies of the Mayor's presentation of the budget had run out. Residents of Midville and West Branch Library patrons turned out to show support for the branch and donned white nametag-sized stickers which were labeled with either the phase "Save West" or "I Support the West Library" brightly printed in all capital rainbow-colored letters.
>
> The mayor goes through the upcoming fiscal year's budget page by page. He explains each Power Point slide one by one including the various factual bullet points as he goes. He is currently discussing the next fiscal year's waste management budget, people in the audience look somewhat bored, fidgety, and slightly impatient.
>
> The mayor nonchalantly slips in that "all libraries will stay open and operated by the city" as he talks about that part of the budget (this seems to be a very particu-

lar way to phrase this announcement as no other library branch in Jamesburg besides the West Branch Library had been up for closure or even service reduction).

In response to the mayor's indirect acknowledgement of West Branch Library being spared from closure during budget cuts, a library supporter assertively interrupts the mayor by yelling, "Does that include West Branch?!" After he confirms, people clap and cheer, but the response is delayed (people seemed skeptical?).

Additionally, in fighting to keep the library open, some community members made comments during the meeting to Mayor Espisito emphasizing that the library was the only resource that the Midville community had of its own in comparison to other neighborhoods. The awareness and articulation of the limited nature of *their own neighborhood* resources suggests that part of the significance placed in maintaining a neighborhood library within the area is related to preserving a local neighborhood-based identity (Proctor and Simmons, 2000:32; Proctor, Usherwood, and Sobczyk,1996: 37). One of the arguments that had let to the consideration of closing the library to fund the budget-gap was that if the branch was closed, residents could still travel to the main Center Branch library location, which debatably is within physical walking distance. However, as previously mentioned in the literature review, the awareness of constrained social spaces and violence related to constructed boundaries[20] between neighborhoods, which have practical real life repercussions, shape the ways in which individuals within the community are able and willing to negotiate travel within and between neighborhood areas (Harding 2009:446).[21]

The following quote is from the West Branch Library Manager addressing issues related to neighborhood boundaries in the process of describing and highlighting how a young library patron was concerned about how the possible ensuing library closure might affect them. What becomes apparent through the manager's comments is that there are practical implications of socially constructed boundaries between neighborhoods within the city, and that community members are aware and maintain these boundaries:

> Youth are dealing with territories right now, and it's very difficult for youth to move from one location in the city to another. For me, or anyone else to say that, "just tell the children that go to West library to go to the Foxhill Library, or go to Oakridge Library, or go to the library in Westville," well, that's a little bit more comfortable for some people than others. Um, some youth can't move from Midville to Willington, let alone from Willington to Midville to Oakridge to the Foxhill, it just doesn't operate like that. And I think that there, more people need to sit to the table and really understand that, and…and I have the children say to me all the time, the youth say: "Miss Dana, well you're one of those people that you can live in the Ville but you can work in the Tribe." And…, and I think that, that's very cutely said but I can also understand the seriousness of it. I can get it my car, or I can walk-which I do sometimes. I live four blocks away from here and I live in Willington, and then I come down here, and I work in Midville and I take that for granted. Um, but there are many youth that, you are well aware of, that just cannot walk from Willington to Midville, or any other neighborhood without it being a problem. So, that's one of the things that really, really concerns me, for someone to say, "Well, the kids from this neighborhood can just walk to another library."

These comments by the West Branch employee which directly quote a local youth illustrate explicitly the observed social phenomenon of constrained social space (Harding, 2005).[22] Midville is a neighborhood area which has invisible walls, or imagined boundaries that have *real* effects that separate and segregate. Collins (2010) calls for the reconceptualization of "community" as a political construct (bearing in mind her emphasis on the interchangeable nature of the terms neighborhood and community within everyday use, and hence relevance to this discussion), she argues that one dimension of understanding community as a political construct is recognizing the close association between community and symbolic boundary construction (24). The issues raised during the threat of closure of the local West Branch library location, provides possible exploratory support for Collins assertions regarding this dimension of community as being closely related to symbolic boundary construction and subsequently, in the case of Midville, the identity-formed vis-à-vis the neighborhood further strengthened the community as a political construct in direct regard to maintaining the West Branch library as a local, institutionally-supported resource.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Forty-one years after the original letters initially spelt, "Public Library," the new mostly green awning with blue trim now reads in bright white letters "Midville Branch Library," additionally, directly above the entrance of the library additional bright white letters read "Jamesburg Free Public Library." The façade of the formerly, all-brick exterior is now decorated with public art work in the form of a mural which celebrates the living history of the Midville neighborhood. Beyond the positive physical signs of renewal, the West Branch library still operates on reduced service hours with only a handful of rotating Saturday openings. During the period of this research project, the discount grocery store, which was once a part of the plaza was closed, and now stands empty. The only other grocer, a larger retail chain grocery store, which was located further away, but still accessible to Midville residents with out having to rely on transportation such as public bus systems, or private automobile, subsequently was also closed after being bought out by another grocery chain which deemed the location unprofitable. The continued trend of declining resources of both a public and a private nature, which

directly affects residents of Midville highlights the prevalent dangers that neighborhoods of all sizes are facing.

The findings presented in this paper are from the initial stages of a research project which provides exploratory empirical data exemplifying how non-traditional uses of a local library, that have been previously ignored or infrequently measured, are relevant in examining the role of the library as a publicly provided social institution and resource within the context of the local neighborhood. The empirical findings highlight the significance of the local library as a meaningful institutionally-supported resource for neighborhood residents in impoverished and marginalized areas. This suggests that future research endeavors concerned with urban poverty may want to examine and address the roles of various local public institutions like community centers in poor urban areas. One possible issue with this suggestion it that during this time of economic crisis, most poor urban neighborhood areas no longer have community centers of their own. Consequently, what if libraries are "the last defense" in protecting publicly-supported neighborhood institutions in the battle of budget cuts? This would seemingly make all aspects regarding libraries increasingly relevant to explore.

Furthermore, in considering Wilson's (1987) findings, if the subjects of interest are similar in many ways within a city of concentrated urban poor (i.e., characteristically homogeneous: think of large areas of Chicago, Philadelphia, L.A.), what do neighborhood boundaries then demarcate? Creative theoretical application of Small, Harding and Lamont's articulation of symbolic boundaries as being integral to social identities in similar ways as narratives, yet different in that symbolic boundaries "illuminate the cultural basis of group divisions" (2010: 17) may help to construct research approaches which will more appropriately answer questions regarding urban poverty, while still being theoretically informed by Wilson's (1987) findings through a reconceptualization of ideas regarding constructed neighborhood boundaries as more salient in considering research in urban, impoverished areas that are homogeneous in racial make-up. Further examination which supports that local neighborhood areas hold significant impact, and have a probable chance of being more relevant than city units in regards to neighborhood effects studies are needed, hence, consideration has to be given to the serious implications of the possible reallocation or division of city resources towards specific local neighborhoods. The possibility that these resources are more crucially needed and impactful in these areas should be further researched and considered.

Ongoing phases of this project seek to further examine the role of the West Branch Library as a neighborhood institution, and more broadly examine the relevance of libraries as one of the final survivors of "dying neighborhood" institutions. A secondary phase of this research project which may aide in broadening the scope and generalizabilty of the research findings and implications is a comparison to a broader, large-scale case involving the ongoing tracking of the threat of closure to the city of Philadelphia's entire library system which consists of 54 library branch locations. Additionally, continued field work with West Branch will ensue in possible conjunction with other qualitative methods such as interviews, surveys, or focus groups. Further research is needed to help better-inform policy makers and provide data-driven support regarding the relevance of neighborhood institutions like the local library.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to especially thank Waverly Duck for his ongoing support and encouragement with this project. I would like to thank: Elijah Anderson, Jeffrey Alexander, Julia Adams, Richard Breen, Rene Almeling, and Erica Chito Childs for their continued guidance. I am grateful to Nadine Amalfi, Sorcha Brophy-Warren, Anette Fasang, and Sarah Egan for helpful comments on this paper. Finally, I would like to thank all my friends and family for their unwavering support and encouragement. This ongoing research project is supported by the George W. Camp Mini Grant through the Sociology Department at Yale University.

Carolyn Ly is currently a doctoral student in Sociology at Yale University. Her research interests include: cultural sociology, urban poverty, ethnography, race and ethnicity, and Asian American Studies. Carolyn holds a master's degree in Sociology from Yale University, and a B.A. *summa cum laude* from Hunter College, City University of New York; *Phi Beta Kappa*. Currently she is working on two additional research projects, the first examines culturally-significant racialized representations of Asian Americans in film, the second addresses the processes and social mechanisms which shape racialized categorization of others within an intersectional framework. Address: P.O. Box 208265 New Haven CT 06520-8265 [email:Carolyn.ly@yale.edu]. Please contact Carolyn Ly via email if you have any inquires or suggestions regarding this project. Thank you in advance for your interest.

Waverly Duck is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. His research interests focus primarily on inequality using ethnographic methods to study the orderliness of recognizable situated practices concerning race, class, age, gender and social change. That is, he is interested in the observable and locally recognized mechanisms which cause and subsequently reproduce inequality overtime.

ENDNOTES

1 The study was by Samantha Becker, Michael Crandal, Karen Fisher, Bo Kinney, Carol Landry, and Anita Rocha through the University of Washington Information School and was funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services along with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

2 "Socially accepted" refers to the local knowledge of neighborhood boundaries. While these neighborhoods are not labeled as such on a published map, a resident of the city would know of the neighborhoods and be able to identify the general areas. This is similar, on a smaller scale, to the ways in which cities such as Philadelphia, Los Angeles, or Chicago are known to have socially accepted or understood neighborhoods.

3 This includes but is not limited to: consensus of residents' perceived boundaries utilizing statistical techniques (centroid-calculated and averaged block group areas: Coultron et al, 2001); "face block" measures which break-down blocks into segments on one side of the street (Taylor, 1995); "tertiary community" units or "t-communities" which Grannis identifies as "communities defined by their internal access via pedestrian streets" (Grannis 2005: 295); and ethnographic research methods that rely on observational participation "to provide a truthful rendition and analysis of the social and cultural world of the subject"(Anderson, 2001:16006).

4 The larger focus of Harding's (2009) work examines how violence, as an influencing factor, limits or constrains geographic social spaces identified often as neighborhood boundaries in urban area, and the resulting unintended consequences to forming heterogeneous peer groups.

5 Due to the ongoing nature of this research project, while data collected for this paper was public (all observations were made in public spaces and comments are quoted from publicly published materials), all names and locations are pseudonyms.

6 For further discussion of the declining availability of jobs and the urban poor see William Julius Wilson (1996).

7 All descriptive data was obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Fact Finder via thematic maps by block group with data divided into seven data classes.

8 This case includes additional analysis of historical and structural factors which are currently unpublished and due to length constraints are not presented in this paper.

9 See Jack Katz's (2010) argument encouraging historically informed (ethnographic) research and the ensuing discussion which calls for greater attention to the role of temporality within interpreting empirical data in current research, specifically ethnographic studies conducted within urban centers which Katz emphasizes are embedded in the historical trajectories of their corresponding urban centers.

10 For a brief discussion on the merits of theoretical sampling within ethnographic research see Wilson (2009: 550). See also Willer (1967).

11 See also Wilson (1996). Additionally for a discussion of the on-going research which spawned from findings presented in *The Truly Disadvantaged* see Small and Newman (2001).

12 One field note is recorded from the Mayor's budget meeting which took place at the main library branch. Additionally, some later field visits were only transcribed if observations of new and anomalous nature occurred.

13 For further discussion on the difference between "participant observation" and "observing participant" style ethnographies see Anderson, 2001: 16005-16006.

14 It is not the intention of this paper to address the validity and reliability of one approach of ethnography ("participant observation" and "observing participant") over the other. These differences are merely highlighted as referential within the discussion of this particular paper's methodological approach during this phase of the research project. For a brief discussion on the historical evolution of Urban Ethnography see Anderson (2001).

15 Their acknowledgement and then subsequent lack of attention to the researcher, someone who is visually different than the existing community members due to distinct "ethnic" features, signaled acceptance or "in" status as a patron within the social space of the library: Incidences were observed in which a few non-regular or visually different patrons visited the library and were treated with great attention by the librarians who immediately inquired about what they might need, or be looking for. Often after the initial few visits, even though occasional inquiries were made about borrowing a book or the use of a public library computer, the librarians would quickly disregard the researcher's presence after a brief greeting, which was very similar to their treatment of regular library patrons. Noted was the dif-

ference of how the library patrons marked the presence of the researcher during the first few visits but then in subsequent visits, looked up with a quick glance and returned to their own task with disinterest. The researcher does not claim to be "in" according to the definition of urban ethnographers who often aim to become close to the subjects of their studies – people. In contrast, the nature of the inquiries made during this phase of research was more so related to the institutional role and function of the library regarding utility.

16 This was a directly utilized phrased by a library patron which was recorded in a field note.

17 In recognizing that running into the library may have been the closest and easiest thing to do (although the neighboring church entrance was at least the same distance away if not closer), no claims are being made based solely on this event; instead, it is provided as supplemental evidence which may bolster the other collective empirical illustrations and theoretical arguments.

18 "The U House" was an abbreviation for the official title of "Unity Community Center"

19 It could be argued that the language of the petition supports sociological research on urban poverty, which Small and Newman (2001: 33) identify as resource models and are theoretical approaches that emphasize how the lack of various institutional resources within poor neighborhoods are instrumental mechanisms that produce neighborhood effects.

20 See also a relevant discussion on "symbolic boundaries" as discussed by Maria Small, David J. Harding, and Michèle Lamont (2010: 17) within a larger, also pertinent overview of the discussion and conceptualization of "culture" within the context of poverty research.

21 See also Newman and Massengill's discussion of Harding (2006:43).

22 The Branch Manager's statements also implicitly illustrates the social phenomena of truncated or constrained resources had the library closure ensued, since the relationship between truncated geographical space and truncated resources are interrelated. Additionally, her statement speaks indirectly to other more general discussions within neighborhood effects studies which focus of socialization mechanisms (Harding 2009; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley, 2002: 446)

REFERENCES

Abbott, A. (1997). Of time and space: The contemporary relevance of the Chicago School. *Social Forces*: 75, 1149-82.

Anderson, E. (2001). Urban ethnography. *The International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (pp. 16004-16008).

Bampton, B. (1999). Confirming What We Know. *Library Campaigner*, 61(6).

Becker, S., Crandal, M. D., Fisher, K. E., Kinney, B., Landry, C. & Rocha, A. (2010). Opportunity for all: How the American public benefits from internet access at U.S. libraries. *Institute of Museum and Library Services*. Washington, D.C.

Burton, L. M., Price-Spratlen, T., & Spencer, M. B. (1997). On ways of thinking about measuring neighborhoods: Implications for studying context and developmental outcomes for children. In J. Brooks-Gunn, G. J. Duncan, & J. L. Aber (Eds.) *Neighborhood poverty: Context and consequences for children Volume II* (pp. 132-144). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Collins, P. H. (2010). The new politics of community. *American Sociological Review,* 75(1), 7-30.

Coulton C. J., Korbin, J., Chan, T., & Su, M. (2001). Mapping residents' perceptions of neighborhood boundaries: a methodological note. *American Journal of Community Psychology,* 29, 371–383.

Elliot, D. & Huizinga, D. (1990). *Mediating effects of social structure in high risk neighborhoods*. Denver, CO: Youth Survey, Project Report No. 10. Boulder, CO: University of Colorado.

Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In C. Geertz (Ed.) *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays (pp. 3-30)*. New York: Basic Books.

Grannis, R. (2005). T-Communities: Pedestrian street networks and residential segregation in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. *City & Community*, 4(3): 295-322.

Haney, W. G., & Knowles, E. C. (1978). Perception of neighborhoods by city and suburban residents. *Human Ecology*, *6,*

201–214.

Harding D. J. (2005). *Why neighborhoods matter: structural and cultural influences on adolescents in poor communities*. PhD thesis. Cambridge: Harvard University.

Harding, D. J. (2009). Violence older peers, and the socialization of adolescent boys in disadvantaged neighborhoods. *American Journal of Sociology*, 74, 445-464.

Katz, J. (2010). Time for new urban ethnographies. *Ethnography* 11(1), 25-44.

Korbin, J. & Coulton, C. (1997). Understanding the neighborhood context for children and families: Epidemiological and ethnographic approaches. In. J. Brooks-Gunn, G. J. Duncan, & J. L. Aber. (Eds.) *Neighborhood poverty: Context and consequences for children volume II* (pp. 65-79). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Logan, J. R., & Collver, O. A. (1983). Residents' perceptions of suburban community differences. .*American Sociological Review*, *48*(3), 428–433.

Massey, D. & Denton, N. (1998). *American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the underclass*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

Meyer, S. E., & Jencks, C. (1989). Growing up in poor neighborhoods: How much does it matter? *Science*, 17, 1441–1445.

Newman, K., & Massengill R. (2006). The texture of hardship: Qualitative sociology of poverty, 1995-2005. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 32, 423-446.

Park, R. E., Burgess, E. W., & McKenzie, R. D. (1925). *The city*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Proctor, R., Usherwood, B. & Sobczyk, G. (1996). What do people do when their public library service closes down? An investigation into the impact of the Sheffield Libraries strike. *British Library Research and Development Department Report 6224*. British Library, London.

Proctor, R. (1999a). People, politics and hard decisions. *Public Library Journal*, 14(1), 2-4.

Proctor, R. (1999b). The use of the public library for learning." *Learning Resources Journal,* 15(1), 11-14.

Proctor, R. & Simmons, S. (2000). Public library closures: The management of hard decisions." *Library Management*. 21(1), 25-34.

Sampson, R. J. & Morenoff, J. D. (1997). Ecological Perspectives on the Neighborhood Context of Urban Poverty: Past and Present. In J. Brooks-Gunn, G. J. Duncan, & J. L. Aber (Eds.) *Neighborhood poverty: Context and consequences for children Volume II* (pp. 1-22). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Sampson R. J. & Raudenbush, S. W. (1999). Systematic social observation of public spaces: a new look at disorder in urban neighborhoods. *American Journal of Sociology,* 105, 603–651.

Sampson, R. J., Morenoff, J. D. & Gannon-Rowely, T. (2002). Assesing 'neighborhood effects': Social processes and new directions in research. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 28, 443-478.

Small, M. L. & Newman, K. (2001). Urban poverty after The Truly Disadvantaged: The rediscovery of the family, the neighborhood, and culture. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 23-45.

Small, M. L., Harding, D. J., & Lamont, M. (2010). Reconsidering culture and poverty. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 629(6), 6-27.

Taylor, R. B., Gottfredson, S. D., & Brower, S. (1984). Block crime and fear: Defensible space, social ties, and territorial functioning. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *21*(4), 303–331.

Taylor R. B. (1995). Street blocks with more non-residential land use have more physical deterioration: Evidence from Baltimore and Philadelphia. *Urban Affairs Review*, 31, 20-36

Willer, D. (1967). *Scientific sociology: Theory and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wilson, W. J. (1996). *When work disappears: The world of the new urban poor*. New York: Knopf.