

---

**7**

---

# Behind the Program-Room Door: The Creation of Parochial and Private Women's Realms in a Canadian Public Library<sup>1</sup>

**Pamela J. McKenzie**

*Associate Professor, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western  
Ontario—London, Ontario*

**Elena M. Prigoda**

*Instruction and Liaison Librarian, Gerstein Science Information Centre, University of Toronto,  
Toronto, Ontario*

**Kirsten Moffatt**

*Educational Outreach and Young Adult Librarian, Brantford Public Library, Brantford, Ontario*

**Lynne (E.F.) McKechnie**

*Associate Professor, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western  
Ontario—London, Ontario*

## INTRODUCTION

Much has been written recently on the role of the public library as a commons where members of the public may gather (Nelson) or as a site for the building of “social capital” (Goulding). However, the research into public library use tends to focus on the use of collections, services, and specific resources (e.g., Zweizig and Dervin, Shoham, Gross, Dresang, and Holt) without considering the ways that the library *as a place* is used: “Although there have been hundreds of studies of library users and their information-related behaviors, relatively little of this research has focused on libraries as a type of social activity space” (Given and Leckie 372).

This chapter describes the use of public space in two programs, a knitters’ group and a young child/caregiver storytime, attended by women in a single branch of a large (>100,000) Ontario public library system. We analyze the ways that these women transformed the space of a public library program room into semiprivate or private realms, and discuss the implications of those transformations. We therefore build on the research of Leckie and Hopkins by extending observation and analysis from central to branch libraries and to less visible but still publicly owned areas of the public library. We consider the social spaces located within the library as a physical space (Leckie and

Hopkins, Dixon et al., McKechnie et al., Miller) and the library in the life of the user (Wiegand).

### PUBLIC SPACE AND THE PUBLIC REALM

Leckie and Hopkins argue that “given the murkiness surrounding the identification of which spaces are public and which are private or semiprivate, it seems rather futile to define public space by a characteristic, such as ownership, or a physical attribute such as openness. Contemporary public spaces can perhaps be more usefully thought of in terms of the activities that take place within them and the sociocultural functions that these spaces perform” (330). Lyn Lofland (“World” 11) concurs that public spaces are inherently social and has been central in studying urbanites’ use of public city spaces and analyzing the meanings of those spaces for users.

Lofland defines public space simply as “accessible or visible to all members of the community” (“Public” 8). One of the most important characteristics of public space is that it comprises a *world of strangers*, or people “with whom one has not had personal acquaintance” (Lofland, “Public” 7). Life in a world of strangers is made possible by “an ordering of the urban populace in terms of appearance and spatial location such that those within the city could know a great deal about one another by simply looking” (Lofland, “World” 22). Urbanites use such ordering to identify and classify strangers, to seek out or avoid interactions with them, and to create smaller pieces of private or semiprivate space in public space.

Lofland posits that city life consists of three distinct but interrelated *realms* (“Public” 9–12, “World” 119–20). Realms are social rather than physical spaces, and are defined by the relationships among the people occupying them rather than by physical characteristics. The public realm is characterized by the presence of people who are personally unknown or only categorically known to one another, for example a customer and shop owner who interact intermittently and infrequently. The parochial realm is characterized by a sense of commonality among acquaintances or neighbors who are involved in interpersonal networks that are located within “communities.” There are “regulars” in a parochial space, and patrons have nodding or speaking acquaintances with their fellows. Many of Oldenburg’s “third spaces” fall within the parochial social realm. The private realm is characterized by ties of intimacy among primary group members who are located within households and personal networks.

There is nothing inherent in a physical location to make it one type of realm or other. Thus, a legally “public” place can be sociologically “parochial,” a family home can become a public realm when opened for a charity tour, or a public zoo can be the site of a private realm where family and caregiving relationships are enacted (DeVault, “Producing”). Because realms are social rather than geographic, they are quite fluid and can change over time. The higher the number of close relationships in a space and the more intimate the inhabitants’ knowledge of the space, the closer the space is to functioning as a private realm for its inhabitants, and the more likely it is that those inhabitants will treat the setting like their home, using the space for their own private purposes apart from those originally intended, behaving in informal and casual ways, and adopting an attitude of proprietary rights toward the setting. The complaints of Leckie and Hopkins’ participants about the noise of other patrons may be taken as evidence that not all users consider the public library to be a public realm space. As McKechnie et al. found, central and branch public libraries were the sites of a great deal of socializing,

eating, and drinking in addition to reading and quiet study. The same physical spaces may be used in a variety of ways by different patrons, possibly at the same time, and may function variously as public, parochial, or private realm spaces.

This chapter seeks to further explore patrons' uses of program-room spaces in a public library branch. The two studies described here explored how library storytimes for young children and their adult caregivers and a public library–hosted knitters group functioned as social spaces for their inhabitants.

## METHODS

Both studies used naturalistic participant observation (Lincoln and Guba), which allowed us to witness the use of the St. Stephen's Green Library first-hand rather than relying on the memories and descriptive abilities of participants. In the fall of 2003, McKechnie and McKenzie, with the assistance of Moffatt, observed and audiotaped a full five-week session of a storytime program as part of a larger study (McKechnie and McKenzie). We stood in the room as unobtrusively as possible and made notes as we observed. Between 8 and 16 young children from birth to 24 months attended storytime with their caregivers each week.

In the fall of 2004 Prigoda, assisted by McKenzie, observed and audio-recorded meetings of a branch-hosted knitters group. We participated actively, knitting and chatting as we observed, and recorded our observations after leaving the library. Weekly attendance at the knitters' group was about fifteen, although a total of twenty-five women attended over the course of the fall.

All four authors contributed to the framing of the studies and the data collection. McKenzie is responsible for the analysis and the writing of this chapter, which is based on McKenzie's, Prigoda's, and Moffatt's field notes from both studies, and a total of fifteen transcripts reflecting seven sessions (five storytime and two knitters group) and eight interviews (one focus group and two individual interviews with storytime participants, five individual interviews with knitters). We developed interview schedules following the field observation (Warren).<sup>2</sup> Both studies conform to the ethical guidelines of the University of Western Ontario and the Tri-Council policy statement on research with humans (Tri-Council Policy Statement).

## SPATIAL ORDERING OF STRANGERS

Urbanites make use of two distinct principles of ordering strangers. Clues to a stranger's identity are provided simultaneously by his or her appearance (appearential ordering) and location (spatial ordering). "Appearential ordering allows you to know a great deal about the stranger you are looking at because you can 'place' him with some degree of accuracy on the basis of his body presentation: clothing, hair style, special markings, and so on. In contrast, spatial ordering allows you to know a great deal about the stranger you are looking at because you know a great deal about 'who' is to be found in the particular location in which you find him" (Lofland, "World" 27).

In preindustrial cities, Lofland argues, appearential ordering was the most useful means of identifying strangers. A variety of diverse activities (e.g., begging, busking, educating children, eliminating wastes) took place in public space, and a stranger's appearance (clothing, language) allowed him or her to be categorized. Modern cities, on the other hand, are characterized by the specialized use of public space and the

spatial segregation of activities. Many activities formerly carried out in public space are licensed, limited, or relegated to private spaces. Urban residents are segregated by age (in schools and seniors' homes), class, and ethnicity (in neighborhoods). In addition, appearance is no longer such a useful indicator of category. The young person wearing jeans and a sweatshirt could be a high school student, a vagrant, or a corporate CEO. As a consequence,

the modern urbanite, in contrast to his preindustrial counterpart, primarily uses location rather than appearance to identify the strange others who surround him. In the preindustrial city, space was chaotic, appearances were ordered. In the modern city, appearances are chaotic, space is ordered. In the preindustrial city, a man was what he wore. In the modern city, a man is where he stands. (Lofland, "World" 82)

This is not to say that appearance and behavior are unimportant, rather that they are most reliable when used in the context of spatial knowledge.

In this particular case, library users could have several forms of categorical knowledge, both spatial and appearance, available to them about one another by virtue of their presence in the library. Numerous studies have profiled the demographics of library users (for a summary, see I. Smith), but McNicol offers insights into the kinds of spatial ordering that are available to a stranger by virtue of a person's regular presence in a public library. She used data from a British mass-observation archive to gather opinions of the kinds of people who use libraries. Respondents offered several impressions: "School children, the middle aged and older people . . . Other user groups mentioned were mothers and toddlers; men out shopping with their wives, and non-working married women. In general, library users were seen as people with reasonable amounts of spare time . . . avid readers." (83). Regardless of the degree to which these impressions correspond with the characteristics of actual British library users, this list of criteria provides evidence that urbanites do make inferences about people related to their use or non-use of a library. For example, one of McKechnie's informants described the neighborhood public library as "an environment that you assume people are friendly because they all use books" (110).

Someone coming into the St Stephen's Green library for the first time could infer several kinds of categorical knowledge about the strangers inhabiting the space based merely on their presence there. First, they have chosen to be present in a public library and could therefore be expected to value public libraries and at least some of the services they provide. Second, they have been permitted to remain. Libraries, like bookstores, "provide places where hanging out is indeed welcomed yet where 'security' is preserved by the . . . manager's right to reject undesirable visitors" (Miller 395). We observed a library staff member asking a library visitor to leave for behaving inappropriately.

Presence in this particular public library further signals that a stranger may be affiliated (or want to be affiliated: one of the knitters called herself a "St. Stephen's Green wannabe") with the neighborhood and share some of the social characteristics of its residents. St. Stephen's Green is an older residential neighborhood, containing many small businesses and services and located on easily accessible bus routes and walking/bike paths to downtown.<sup>3</sup> The neighborhood is relatively affluent and is known locally for its liberal sensibilities. The unemployment rate is less than 1 percent, and 25 percent of the population have a university degree. Family income is above the provincial average

and more people are employed in white-collar professions and fewer in the trades, processing, and manufacturing than in either the city or the province. The neighborhood is both ethnically and linguistically homogeneous.<sup>4</sup> People encountering strangers in this neighborhood could therefore expect to meet mainly white, well-educated, socially liberal people.

When taken in conjunction with spatial ordering, appearance and behavior can provide further clues about the identity of strangers. Our field notes provide evidence of the ways that we categorized strangers in this setting:

There is a woman in her thirties wearing a bike helmet and a backpack using one of the computer terminals; she is only there for a brief time before leaving the library, almost as though she were checking something on her way to work. [KM]<sup>5</sup>

The woman's location in a bicycle-friendly neighborhood, her presence in the public library at the beginning of the work day, her behavior while in the library, the duration of her stay, her perceived age, and her appearance combine to provide clues that allow the observer to categorize her, rightly or wrongly, as a commuter on her way to work. Lofland contends that this kind of categorization is part of what urbanites do regularly when dealing with strangers.

In addition to the categorical knowledge associated with a stranger's presence in the library itself, presence in the program room at the beginning of storytime or the knitters group additionally demonstrates an awareness of library-sponsored programs and some understanding of what libraries do and how they do it; an interest in participating and congruence with at least some values associated with the program or the activities performed therein; the organization, motivation, and transportation needed to get there at a particular time; and the flexibility to participate during the normal work day. A participant's ability to be present at the library on a weekday morning or afternoon suggests that she is unemployed, retired, on leave, working at home full-time, employed away from home part-time, or that her full-time employment is structured to permit this kind of schedule.

Within the context of this spatial ordering, a number of apperial clues could supplement categorical knowledge about a program participant. First, a woman's own apparel, the apparel of her child, and the color and style of the chosen knitting project could invite taste and possibly income categorizations. Her level of experience could be inferred by the age of her child or the complexity of the knitting project chosen and the degree to which she asked for assistance. The age of the woman or of her child could provide an indicator of her status in the workforce. A woman over sixty-five is likely to retire and one whose youngest child is over a year old is probably no longer on a paid parental leave.<sup>6</sup>

The combination of spatial and apperial clues therefore provide a newcomer to the scene with many tools with which to categorize a stranger:

[Ten minutes after the beginning of the program] my attention is distracted by a woman coming into the room. She has a soother on a ribbon on her shirt and is carrying a diaper bag and an infant car seat. I thought she looked tired and harried, and that observation combined with the infant car seat, her lateness, and the presence of the soother on her rather than on her baby led me to guess she had a very young baby [PM].

When a newcomer arrives at the program room door for storytime or knitting, several kinds of evidence are available to her and she can already guess a lot (rightly or wrongly) about the kinds of people she will meet inside. A relationship initiated in such a setting is therefore not a relationship among strangers, but rather a relationship among categorically known others, for whom the categories are quite sophisticated. By virtue of their very co-presence in this space participants are communicating that they likely have a lot in common, even before the first word is spoken.

### WOMEN, WORK, LEISURE, AND SPACE

Despite evidence that women make extensive use of public libraries (D. Smith) and despite the oft-cited claim that the library “is often one of the few places in a busy city centre where people, particularly women, of all ages go alone and spend time without worry” (Greenhalgh, Warpole, and Landry 52),<sup>7</sup> we know surprisingly little about the ways that women use public libraries (see King, Rothbauer). This absence may be due in part to the focus on the library as a site for a number of “productive” and “purposeful” activities.

Leckie and Hopkins found that “[t]he evidence from the seating sweeps was revealing in confirming that the central library is considered by most patrons to be a place of purposeful study. . . . The central library acts primarily as a public work space and not a recreational space” (355). Cartwright likewise found that “the library is more widely seen and used as a place for study, information and defined ‘retrieval’, whilst the bookstore is more widely seen and used as a place for recreation, socialising and browsing” (22). Wiegand (371) argues that these impressions are characteristic of a larger trend: “over time the LIS community came to regard as most important the kinds of information that address questions related to work, or help people become informed citizens, intelligent consumers, and educated people.”

Feminist scholars have long questioned the fixed boundaries between public and private spaces and have sought a more nuanced understanding of the nature and organization of the work and leisure activities that take place within them:

In the classic traditions of sociological theorizing, the labels “public” and “private” were taken as referring to two great realms organized very differently (and associated with men versus women and adults versus children, respectively). There were good reasons for thinking this way because these new forms of social organization developed with industrialization; the labels “public” and “private” pointed to large social transformations that were positioning men, women, and families quite differently than in predominantly agricultural societies. For at least three decades now, however, feminists and others have been emphasizing the permeability of the ostensible boundaries between these territories and the connections that make the appearance of bounded space possible. (DeVault, “Families”)

Commensurate with a recognition of the permeability of the public/private divide, feminist scholars have argued for a more inclusive definition of “work” which values the sorts of activities that comprise the often invisible work done, frequently by women, in private spaces. These include exactly the activities commonly disregarded by LIS researchers as “non-instrumental activities—sitting, waiting, chatting, reading and watching” (Greenhalgh et al. 74–5).

Defining work inclusively has two important implications for the consideration of public and private spaces. First, defining leisure merely as “recreation from paid employment” risks overlooking the kinds of activities that take place in “everyday leisure spaces”: the “‘hidden’ forms of leisure associated with the home, with children, or related to household work, shopping, or everyday consumption” (Aitchison 74). Conversely, associating family work only with the physical environment of the home risks falling prey to the erroneous assumptions

that family happens, especially for the youngest children, primarily within the bounded walls of the private home and that the “outside world” becomes relevant only as children mature. I would argue, on the contrary, that even as infants children begin to experience the larger physical and social environments in immediate proximity to their homes, as well as those they travel through and to with other family members. (DeVault, “Families” 1302)

This analysis therefore troubles the binary of “work” and “leisure” along with that of “public” and “private.” A brief introduction to the physical space and participants in each setting, and an overview of the literature on women’s participation in child care and textile handwork activities will serve to situate our two programs physically and theoretically in terms of these binaries.

### **STORYTIME: “A REALLY HAPPY PLACE FOR BABIES TO SPEND SOME TIME”**

Storytime at St. Stephen’s Green library was held on a weekday morning. Each session was attended by infants, babies moving toward sitting and crawling, and some able to stand and/or walk. The formal program lasted about 20 minutes and was followed by an opportunity for informal discussion and interaction with library materials. On the first day of storytime, the librarian provided an overview:

We’ll start with an opening couple of songs and rhymes and we’ll sort of work through a routine that we’ll follow every single week where we’ll do some tickle rhymes and we’ll do some action rhymes and then we’ll do a little bit of singing and it will be mixed up with some stories in between. And at the very end of all of that, I’ll put some board books down in the middle and we’ll have a little time to just chat amongst ourselves and you can have a look at some books that are good for babies and get to meet each other. You’ll notice that the babies’ names are on the top of your nametags and underneath that is the name of the person who’s brought the baby today, so it makes it easier to talk to them and get to know them a little bit. Also, I have, for babies who are old enough, I have an animal cracker, a little one.

Stooke (“Healthy”) reported that children’s librarians identified the creation of a welcoming space as a necessary component of the work they carry out on behalf of young children’s literacy. This librarian had created a particular physical space: her low stool was placed against one wall, with all the props and books stored unobtrusively nearby. A rug indicated the area where families should sit, and families arranged themselves in a horseshoe, its end open to the stool. Some families staked regular territory while others changed position from week to week. A nearby table bore nametags, pamphlets on library programs, extra copies of the books used in the program, other books on the same themes, and the abovementioned board books. The room, a utilitarian and generic

space, was thereby transformed into the kind of space that could support the goals of storytime, and the work of women caring for young children.

Much of the caregivers' work was facilitated by their copresence in the program room with other caregivers. In addition to providing a way to identify and exchange social support (Tardy and Hale), Tardy found that the mundane conversations occurring when mothers and children gather together in a playgroup served "to construct the women's identities, particularly as mothers" (Tardy 436). The actual talk, independent of any outcomes, was part of the evidence of the caring work of good motherhood. Griffith and Smith contend that twentieth-century parent advice literature based on child psychology research has focused increasingly on the mother's role in the child's psychosocial development. "How mothers related to their children came to be held to make the difference between the possibilities of the child reaching his or her full potential and the social waste of his or her unrealized development" (37). It is a widely held part of this "mothering discourse" (Griffith and Smith) that the work of nurturing young children's literacy "must be shared by all of us who work with children" (Kupetz 28), including librarians and teachers, but primarily supported by parents (Stooke, "Many"). Parents' work in support of their very young children's literacy development, including participating in a library storytime program, may therefore fulfill a need be a particular sort of parent.

The program room, set up to facilitate the sharing of books and fingerplays with young children simultaneously facilitates the formation of supportive social ties, the exchange of information relevant to caregivers, and the enactment of the appropriate mothering role.

#### **THE KNITTERS GROUP: "A KIND OF WOMEN'S SUPPORT GROUP"**

The knitters group had been running for a number of years as a weekday afternoon program of the library. Most members had learned to knit as children or young women but for many there were long hiatuses for childrearing and/or paid employment. Most were retired and had grandchildren, although at least one had a school-age child at home and at least one worked part-time. We heard more than one story of being unemployed or on leave from paid employment. Knitters had varying degrees of expertise and commitment to finishing projects. Field notes indicated that some knitters "hardly knit at all" [EP] and that others seemed to have a finished project to show every week.

Textile handwork often takes place in groups such as guilds, fairly formal and organized groups with regular meetings. Members meet to work on and discuss current projects in one another's company. Some guilds provide formal educational programs and workshops, and the combination of novice, experienced, and master crafters in the guild setting allows members both to participate in a leisure activity and to interact with and learn from others sharing a common interest in a craft. (See Schofield-Thompson and Littrell, Piercy and Cheek, Cerny et al.).

At its inception, the St Stephen's Green knitters group provided formal instruction but over the years it had become much more informal in structure. A long table in the middle of the room provided the physical focus for the group's activity. Knitters sat around the table, on which they could set their work. Most sat in regular seats, or at least regular areas of the table, from week to week. A storage cabinet in the room was allocated to the group and held some supplies. At the beginning of the meeting the organizer or another



member might call the group to attention for news of former members or announcements of sales at a local craft shop, local and nearby knitting and craft shows, or upcoming library activities.

While the group was called to order, anyone with a finished project was invited to show and talk about it to the assembled group. Often these projects were passed around: “Knitter 6 showed finished project—pattern said was for advanced knitters only. Wanted to show what she had accomplished” [EP]. Stalker found that home crafters saw knitting as an activity that enabled them to avoid idle time, a means of occupying the mind to stave off worry or loneliness, a link with past and future generations, an appropriate demonstration of their competence as women and mothers, and a source of accomplishment and pride as they decoded a difficult pattern or finished a garment. The finished project served as a physical manifestation of a knitter’s effort, talent, and productive use of time.

Studies of quilting guild participation identify the importance of this kind of show-and-tell for communicating both the significance of the textile objects themselves and the meaning incorporated in their making (Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell 42). Piercy and Cheek (22) argue that the show-and-tell contributes to the negotiation of a female identity as “the guild member publicly documents her achievements and receives validation from other quilters. . . . All participants are welcomed and applauded for their efforts.”

After the focused part of the session, participants knit and had informal conversations in pairs, trios, or larger groups. Those having difficulty asked others for knitting assistance. It was unusual but not unheard-of for the entire group to participate in a single discussion. Knitters passed around patterns, books, newspaper articles, and finished projects, sometimes systematically circulating them, sometimes placing them in the middle of the table and retrieving them as needed. Knitter 3 summarized the kinds of topics that were discussed:

Well we certainly discuss patterns, and knitting, and how-to things. . . . We discuss what’s going on here in the library. . . . We talk about people’s health problems because sometimes people are away for various reasons. We talk about the charities that we might make things for, and getting that stuff together. Who’s going to deliver stuff to the [local women’s shelter], things like that. We talk about movies, or there’ll be something in the news. . . . I think we talked about the [upcoming 2004] US election. And, we talk about local politics. And like, “Who’s going to fix the potholes on a such-and-such road?” things like that. And, oh yeah, recipes, we exchange recipes. Plans for our [group social events] . . . Family is a big thing. Everybody talks about who they’re knitting something for, and what their grandchildren are up to.

Handwork guilds have been identified as “particular examples of ‘feminine culture’” (Piercy and Cheek) and researchers have argued that guild participation involves a socialization process whereby individuals draw on a shared ideology and a collective knowledge of handcraft tradition to express themselves individually through their handwork. This juxtaposition of shared feminine identity and individual self-expression is a common theme in three studies. Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell found that participation in textile handwork guilds supports both development of the self through the production of the craft, and development of the self with others through interpersonal interactions within the guild setting. Cerny et al. argue that the socialization process associated with

guild membership helps women to understand handwork traditions, identify as crafters, and affirm their female identities. The guild is therefore “more than a community in which women make quilts: it is a community where quilting is intimately linked with being female” (Piercy and Cheek 20).

When physically arranged for and occupied by the knitting group, the generic public space of the program room is transformed into a community space where knitting and female identity are intertwined.

### WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIPS IN THE PROGRAM ROOM

When inhabited by women jointly engaged in traditional women's work, the public space of the program room becomes a site, not only for the sharing of stories and of knitting, but also for the enactment of women's identities and the performance of caring. The ethic of care has been found both to constrain women's use of public space (e.g., because of fear for children's safety) and to generate possibilities for women to give and receive care (Day). Use of public spaces therefore affords both work and leisure, potentially simultaneously: Women's experiences of public space frequently involve giving or receiving care or reinforcing relationships with friends and family. In interviews, women described use of public spaces as opportunities to sustain relationships, and to exchange assistance, affection, rewards, and gifts with others (Day 110).

Sociologists have traditionally distinguished between “primary” relationships infused with warmth and intimacy, and “secondary” relationships characterized by relative anonymity and lack of caring, and have valued primary relationships as fulfilling and essential and secondary relationships as shallow and irrelevant. Lofland (“Public” 61–63) challenged this distinction by identifying two types of relationship that blur the boundaries between “primary” and “secondary”: while the individuals may only be categorically known to one another and the relationship may be of short duration, both types can be supportive and infused with emotional warmth and caring. We observed both in the program room.

A *quasi-primary relationship* is an “emotionally colored relationship of ‘transitory sociability’ which takes place in public space. . . . Quasi-primary relationships are created by relatively brief encounters (a few minutes to a few hours) between strangers or between those who are categorically known to one another” (Lofland, “Public” 56), for example dog walkers (Patterson) or customers of a laundromat (Kenen) or second-hand clothing store (Wiseman). The spatial and appearance knowledge available to our participants makes it possible for relationships to exhibit “primary” characteristics even at the initial meeting.

Lofland (“World” 170) observed that people accompanied by children “appear to be legitimately ‘open’ to other persons similarly encumbered,” meaning that such people collectively understand that they may legitimately talk to a stranger about his or her baby, and conversely that their own children are likely to be commented on. A common opening in a conversation among strangers at storytime involved asking a neutral question about someone else's child. This exchange took place the first week of storytime:

Unidentified caregiver: Hello! What's her name?  
Older baby 3's mother: [Gives name]  
Unidentified caregiver: [Repeats name]. And she's how old?  
Older baby 3's mother: Seven months.

Babies sometimes facilitated interactions that their caregivers might not otherwise initiate:

Older baby 5 is sitting on her mom's lap, but begins to lean to the right toward Toddler 3's mom. She reaches out her hands and puts them on Toddler 3's mom's knee; Toddler 3's mom takes one of her hands and holds it for a minute, smiling at Older baby 5's mom [KM].

While knitting at a laundromat indicated that customers were possibly amenable to interaction but not anxious to chat (Kenen), the shared activities and supplies associated with a project in the knitters group, including the pattern, yarn, and ongoing handwork served as nonthreatening conversation starters. "Knitter 7 was making socks in a bright kelly green yarn with red, yellow, and blue flecks. Quite late in the afternoon I asked to look at them" [PM].

Women themselves, "as a group, are regarded as 'socially open' in public space. Compared with men, women smile more, listen more, talk less, self-disclose more, are more emotionally expressive, are more likely to move out of the way, take up less space, and are approached more often by strangers. . . . Women's public behaviors—emotional expressiveness, self-disclosure, listening, approachability—facilitate communication and promote social interaction, sense of community, and a climate of citizenship" (Day 116). A polite interest in someone's child or her knitting project was generally received as supportive and often led to further conversations on a variety of subjects. Many of the activities undertaken in both programs were centered on home and family, and participants easily and frequently discussed their private lives, even with newcomers.

*Intimate-secondary* relationships are likewise emotionally infused but differ from quasi-primary relationships in that they are the relatively long-lasting relationships of "regulars" who may never interact outside their hangout (Lofland, "Public" 56). Wireman (3) developed the concept of intimate-secondary relationships, which

have the dimensions of warmth, rapport, and intimacy normally connected with primary relationships yet occur within a secondary setting and have some aspects of secondary relationships. The dimensions are: intense involvement, warmth, intimacy, sense of belonging, and rapport; mutual knowledge of character; minimal sharing of personal information; minimal socializing; involvement of the individual rather than the family; a commitment that is limited in time and scope and with a relatively low cost of withdrawal; a focus on specific rather than diffuse purposes; consideration of public rather than private matters; and a preference for public meeting places.

Lofland hypothesizes that intimate-secondary relationships may in fact involve socializing, diffuse rather than necessarily specific purpose, and the sharing of personal information. She argues that "the routinized relationships of people who 'know' one another only categorically seem especially capable of being transformed into connections of an intimate secondary sort" (Lofland, "Public" 58). The examples she provides (grocery clerks, bartenders, hairdressers, employees from adjoining shops) share many characteristics with library staff and co-users of the same library space.

Because we observed in the same location for several sequential weeks we observed changes in people's relationships over time and found evidence of intimate-secondary characteristics. Older baby 2's mother was new to the city and did not know anyone on

her first day at storytime. By week 3 it was clear that the mothers knew something about one another's private lives whether or not they were interacting outside of storytime:

Older baby 1's mother: Did she miss your husband when he was away?

Older baby 2's mother: ((inaudible)). But when he came back she was all lit up for him.

Older baby 1's mother: That's nice. That's great!

Older baby 2's mother: She hadn't forgotten about him.

Milestones, such as finished knitting projects, provide more good examples of the development of intimate-secondary relationships. In order to recognize and celebrate something as a milestone one needs both to see the accomplishment and to acknowledge its difference from what happened before. A baby standing unaided is extraordinary only if the observer recognizes this as something new:

PM [to Older baby 1]: Hey Stander!

Older baby 1's mother: Yes!

PM: I saw you standing with no one holding onto you today!

Older baby 1's mother: Pretty soon she's gonna be [walking]!

Some relationships initiated in these worlds of strangers therefore developed characteristics of intimacy. Others provided evidence of intimacy extending beyond the local site. Relational forms are not static but can transform into one another. The fluidity of the relationships is particularly evident as time passes and relationships develop. Quasi-primary and intimate-secondary relationships may begin as fleeting or routinized connections, and may return to a more distant status or may develop to extend beyond the particular location in which they were formed to become friendships or romantic ties.

This characteristic of fluidity takes on special import when we recall again that the proportions and densities of the relational types present in them is what give specific pieces of space their identities *as realms*. A public setting in which the once dominant intimate-secondary relationships have all been transformed into friendships that both exist in but transcend the setting may still—legally and commonsensically speaking—be a public setting. But it is no longer part of the public realm. (Lofland, "Public" 60)

We observed several relationships in the program room that also existed beyond it. Some participants knew one another before coming to the library program, and in fact some joined in order to be with their friends. Others met at the program and extended the relationship beyond this setting. One of the most visible indications that relationships initiated in the program existed beyond it was the stroller walking group started by one of the storytime mothers:

Older baby 5's mother: I'm starting a walking group

Older baby 3's mother: What day do you do it?

Older baby 5's mother: Tuesday mornings. Here.

Older baby 3's mother: Oh OK. Thanks for thinking of me.

The walkers met in front of the library after storytime every week and we saw them as we debriefed over coffee and later left the scene. Our field notes contain several references to it, on succeeding weeks: "As we sit in the coffee shop, the stroller walking group passes by

twice, once heading east, then later back west down St. Stephens Green Avenue” [KM]. Some of the knitters had developed friendships and other kinds of extended relationships, including two who spoke a common non-English first language and a young retiree who regularly drove some of the most senior members to and from the library.

Finally, the program room was a site for the enactment of private family relationships. This use was most evident around the physical care of children. We observed diaper changes and feedings including snacks that technically violated the library’s no-food policy. This flexibility is not unique to this branch and we observed the same kinds of things happening in other libraries. As Lofland notes, urbanites with more intimate knowledge of a public space may gain the acquiescence or even the overt assistance of those in control of the space to make uses that might otherwise be unauthorized (Lofland, “World” 127).

## DISCUSSION

A program room, which is a flexible, and therefore fairly generic, publicly accessible space, may be transformed into very different kinds of realms, both through the specialized layout of furniture and equipment to suit the activities going on within it, and through the interactions of the inhabitants. We argue that, although there are important differences between storytime and the knitters group, there are also important parallels. A number of things are going on within the program room “in the lives of its users” that warrant further attention from LIS researchers.

First, participants shared material resources, both those brought from home and those owned by the library itself. Knitters regularly brought in their old pattern books, knitting magazines, and excess yarn to share. Hand-me-downs filled a similar function at storytime and we witnessed the transfer of a pair of shoes from one family to another. We saw participants doing reference and reader’s advisory work for one another, and recommending and sometimes obtaining library resources:

Knitter 2 had a book out open in front of her, *Knitting Without Tears*, with a library spine label. We talked about it and she said she’d been needing some help and Knitter 3 suggested this book [PM].

Second, we observed what we call “learning the library.” Lofland posits that the skill of coding locations and understanding behavior appropriate to them is developed in childhood: “By example, admonitions, and tongue-lashings, the parent is teaching the child such crucial matters as these: that a grocery store is a place to shop, not to play . . . ; that playgrounds are places to play, not to eliminate waste materials; that libraries are places to read, not to engage in shouting matches, and that one must learn to distinguish such places from one another” (Lofland, “World” 101-2). At storytime we observed a number of examples of very young children learning the library as a place and the librarian as a person. This observation was made during the fifth week of storytime. Toddlers 1 and 2 had been very active participants from the beginning:

Librarian puts down the board books and it is amazing to see this week how many babies are right there as soon as the books hit the ground—and it isn’t just Toddler 2 and Toddler 1 either: Toddler 3, Older baby 2 and Older baby 1 immediately move forward and Older baby 5 soon does too. [KM]

Third, we witnessed many kinds of work, in particular those traditionally done by unpaid family members for one another. Although these twenty-first-century Canadian women could pay someone else to do their knitting or introduce their babies to books, their foremothers would not have had this luxury. The overall purpose of both storytime and the knitters group is therefore in tension. “As studies of women’s leisure continue to show, time synchronization and time fragmentation dominate most women’s lives, which has led them to taking ‘snatched’ spaces for leisure and enjoyment, rather than planned activities” (Green 262). Many women therefore perceive that they have “no right to leisure,” particularly if they are without paid employment (Aitchison 52). Responsibility for childcare, housework, and other domestic responsibilities have further been identified as constraints on women’s use of public space (Day 107-8). As programs facilitating purposive activities in line with household and child care obligations, storytime and the knitters group allow for the simultaneous performance of family-based caring work and the experience of leisure with other women.

Indeed, the reasons participants gave for coming to both programs emphasized both elements. The first question we asked in the storytime focus group was, “Why do you come to storytime?” Initial responses were related to “leisure” activities (“Well it’s a social thing, you know. Otherwise you’re in your house all the time and not talking to other people with kids your age.”) But the next response fit clearly within a particular discourse of mothering (Griffith and Smith) (“And it’s good, you know, you’re supposed to be reading to your babies, so if you don’t get a chance to all the time at least you know they get that here”). For the knitters, “work” took the form of seeking instrumental help with a knitting project, but most of the interviewees described the knitters group in terms of the fellowship and emotional support they experienced.

Fourth, the program room provided women with a venue for engaging in informal conversation with one another. This function of the program room has several important implications. Informal talk may itself be constitutive of women’s friendship (Green) and the conversations of both groups of women showed evidence of emotional support and caring for one another. Women’s mundane conversation in company with other women may further serve to construct, reorient, and challenge their identities as handcrafters (Cerny et al.), as mothers (Tardy), and as women (Green).

Finally, Lofland hypothesized that quasi-primary and intimate-secondary relationships promote the informal exchange of information. We observed participants asking for and giving information both about the topic immediately “at hand” (knitting, child care, and early literacy), and about an extremely wide variety of other topics including child development, health (from birth stories to end-of-life planning), consumer information, community information, how-to, and travel.

## CONCLUSION

Although the public library is commonly regarded as a public space, and therefore part of the world of strangers, the “strangers” joining a public library program for the first time may not in fact be strangers at all, and the public space of the program room may be operating entirely apart from the public realm:

I look around the room and notice that many of the moms have actually taken their shoes off upon arrival—this seems like a sign that they are making themselves comfortable and that they are really *present* at storytime, not just stopping in for 20 minutes; also, more evidence that there is no pressure to appear a certain way at this library [KM].

When this excerpt is read alongside the terms that participants in the Leckie and Hopkins study used to describe other public library users (respectful, kept to themselves, orderly, considerate, studious, polite), it is clear that the social realm of the central library stacks and reading areas is quite different from the realms created by the participants we observed in the program room. The public library cannot then be seen as a single kind of space, but should rather be understood as a site that supports a variety of relationships and hosts a variety of realms.

Given and Leckie considered the importance of acknowledging the “library as interactive place” versus “library as quiet space.” We would go further, and propose that attention to the relationships among library users, between users and staff, and between users and the library space, can free us to reconceptualize both library use and information practices in entirely new ways. Further studies with this kind of focus will contribute to a better understanding both of the library as a physical space and of the library as a social environment in the lives of its users.

### NOTES

1. The authors would like to thank the public library system, the branch head and children’s librarian of the St. Stephen’s Green Branch, and the organizer of the knitters group for providing access and for their ongoing support of our research, the American Library Association for financial support of the storytime study through the Carroll Preston Baber grant, and the library users, both children and adults, who let us into their spaces and realms.

2. The storytime interviews contained questions such as, “Why do you come to this program? What other things do you do with your child(ren)? Is this program different from/similar to other things you do? How?” The knitter interviews contained questions such as “Tell me about yourself as a knitter. Why do you come to the knitters group? What kinds of things are (and are not) talked about? Have you received any information or referrals from other knitters?”

3. More of its inhabitants walk or bike to work than in the city as a whole or the province. All comparisons presented in this overview have been calculated from 2001 Canadian Census data for the region in question (Statistics Canada).

4. Visible minority population is 4.0 percent for the neighborhood, 10.9 percent for the city, and 19.1 percent for the province. The percentage of the population having English as the first language is 89.2 percent for the neighborhood, 79.8 percent for the city, and 70.6 percent for the province (Statistics Canada).

5. Field notes identify their author by her initials.

6. The Canada Labour Code provides for a total of up to 52 weeks of combined maternity leave and parental leave that may be shared between parents (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada). Mothers claim the bulk of the leave time; according to Marshall, approximately 10 percent of fathers claimed parental benefits in 2001.

7. Lofland offered a similar observation in 1973 when she explained that one of her informants “knows from prior experience (as well as from what she has been taught) that she can go into a library or museum for free, that she can hang around in them for a period of time without being thought odd and she, a woman alone, is unlikely there to be either bothered or molested” (Lofland, “World” 105).

### WORKS CITED

- Aitchison, Cara Carmichael. *Gender and Leisure: Social and Cultural Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Cartwright, Helen. “Change in Store? An Investigation into the Impact of the Book Superstore Environment on Use, Perceptions and Expectations of the Public Library as a

- Space, Place, and Experience." *Library and Information Research* 28.88, Spring (2004): 13–26.
- Cerny, Catherine A., Joanne B. Eicher, and Marilyn R. DeLong. "Quiltmaking and the Modern Guild: a Cultural Idiom." *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 12.1 (1993): 16–25.
- Day, Kristen. "The Ethic of Care and Women's Experiences of Public Space." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 20.2 (2000): 103–24.
- DeVault, Marjorie. "Producing Family Time: Practices of Leisure Activity Beyond the Home." *Qualitative Sociology* 23.4 (2000): 485–503.
- DeVault, Marjorie L. "Families and Children: Together, Apart." *American Behavioral Scientist* 46.10 (2003): 1296–305.
- Dixon, Christopher M., et al. "Latte Grande, No Sprinkles: An Exploratory Observational Study of Customer Behaviour at Chapters Bookstores." *Beyond the Web: Technologies, Knowledge and People/Au-Dela Du Web: Les Technologies, La Connaissance Et Les Gens. Proceedings of the 29th Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for Information Science*. Ed. D. Grant Campbell. s. l.; Canadian Association for Information Science, 2001: 165–74.
- Given, Lisa M., and Gloria J. Leckie. "Sweeping the Library: Mapping the Social Activity Space of the Public Library." *Library & Information Science Research* 25.4 (2003): 365–85.
- Gross, Melissa, Eliza T. Dresang, and Leslie E. Holt. "Children's in-Library Use of Computers in an Urban Public Library." *Library & Information Science Research* 26.4 (2004): 311–57.
- Goulding, Anne. "Libraries and Social Capital." *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 36.1 (2004): 3–6.
- Green, Eileen. "'Women Doing Friendship': an Analysis of Women's Leisure as a Site of Identity Construction, Empowerment and Resistance." *Leisure Studies* 17.3 (1998): 171–85.
- Greenhalgh, Liz, Ken Warpole, and Charles Landry. *Libraries in a World of Cultural Change*. London: University College London Press, 1995.
- Griffith, Alison I., and Dorothy E. Smith. *Mothering for Schooling*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. *Pamphlet 5—Maternity-Related Reassignment and Leave, Maternity Leave and Parental Leave. Part III of the Canada Labour Code (Labour Standards)*. 2004. Retrieved 31 August 2005 from <http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/asp/gateway.asp?hr=en/lp/lo/lswel/publications/5.shtml&hs=lxn>.
- Kenen, Regina. "Soapsuds, Space, and Sociability: A Participant Observation of the Laundromat." *Urban Life* 2 July (1982): 163–83.
- King, Geraldine B. "Women Library Users and Library Users of Traditional Women's Subjects." *Reference Librarian* 49/50 (1995): 179–93.
- Kupetz, Barbara N. "A Shared Responsibility: Nurturing Literacy in the Very Young." *School Library Journal* 39 July (1993): 28–31.
- Leckie, Gloria J., and Jeffrey Hopkins. "The Public Place of Central Libraries: Findings From Toronto and Vancouver." *Library Quarterly* 72.3 (2002): 326–72.
- Lincoln, Yvonna S., and Egon G. Guba. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1985.
- Lofland, Lyn H. *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1998.
- . *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Marshall, Katherine. "Benefiting from Extended Parental Leave." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* 4.3 (2003): 5–11.
- McKechnie, Lynne E. F. "Opening the 'Preschoolers' Door to Learning': an Ethnographic Study of the Use of Public Libraries by Preschool Girls." Unpublished PhD dissertation. University of Western Ontario, 1996.
- McKechnie, Lynne E. F., et al. "Covered Beverages Now Allowed: Public Libraries and Book Superstores." *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 28.3 (2004): 39–51.



- McKechnie, Lynne E. F., and Pamela J. McKenzie. "The Young Child / Adult Caregiver Storytime Program As Information Ground." *Library Research Seminar III*.
- McNicol, Sarah. "Investigating Non-Use of Libraries in the UK Using the Mass-Observation Archive." *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 36.2 (2004): 79–87.
- Medical Research Council of Canada, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. Ottawa: Public Works and Government Services, 2003.
- Miller, Laura J. "Shopping for Community: the Transformation of the Bookstore into a Vital Community Institution." *Media Culture & Society* 21.3 (1999): 385–407.
- Nelson, Sandra. *The New Planning for Results: A Streamlined Approach*. Chicago: Public Library Association, 2001.
- Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You through the Day*. New York: Marlowe & Co., 1997.
- Patterson, Mike. "Walking the Dog: An Urban Ethnography of Owners and Their Dogs in the Glebe; Where Can 'Lassie' Go? Territoriality and Contested Spaces." *Alternate Routes* 18 (2002): 5–70.
- Piercy, Kathleen W., and Cheryl Cheek. "Tending and Befriending: The Intertwined Relationships of Quilters." *Journal of Women & Aging* 16.1/2 (2004): 17–33.
- Rothbauer, Paulette M. "Finding and Creating Possibility: Reading in the Lives of Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Young Women." The University of Western Ontario, 2004.
- Schofield-Tomschin, Sherry, and Mary A. Littrell. "Textile Handcraft Guild Participation: A Conduit to Successful Aging." *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 19.2 (2001): 41–51.
- Shoham, Snunith. "Users and Uses of the Public Library Reading Room." *Public Library Quarterly* 20.4 (2001): 33–48.
- Singleton, Royce, et al. *Approaches to Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Smith, Dorothy E. *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987.
- Smith, Ian M. "What Do We Know about Public Library Use?" *ASLIB Proceedings* 51.9 (1999): 302–14.
- Stalker, L. Lynda Harling. "Wool and Needles in My Casket: Knitting as a Habit among Rural Newfoundland Women." Unpublished Master's thesis. Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Statistics Canada. *Census of Canada: Census of Population, Census of Agriculture*. 2001. Retrieved from <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/home/index.cfm>.
- Stooke, Rosamund K. "Healthy, Wealthy and Ready for School: Supporting Young Children's Education and Development in the Era of the National Children's Agenda." The University of Western Ontario, 2004.
- Stooke, Roz. "'Many Hands Make Light Work' but 'Too Many Cooks Spoil the Broth': Representing Literacy Teaching As a 'Job for Experts' Undermines Efforts to Involve Parents." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 37.1 (2005): 3–10.
- Tardy, Rebecca W. "'But I am a Good Mom': The Social Construction of Motherhood through Health-Care Conversations." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 29.4 (2000): 433–73.
- Tardy, Rebecca W., and Claudia L. Hale. "Bonding and Cracking: the Roles of Informal, Interpersonal Networks in Health Care Decision Making." *Health Communication* 10.2 (1998): 151–73.
- Warren, Carol A. B. "Qualitative Interviewing." *Handbook of Interview Research*. Ed. Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002.

- Wiegand, Wayne. "To Reposition a Research Agenda: What American Studies Can Teach the LIS Community about the Library in the Life of the User." *Library Quarterly* 73.4 (2003): 369–82.
- Wireman, Peggy. *Urban Neighborhoods, Networks, and Families: New Forms for Old Values*. Lexington, MA: Lexington, 1984.
- Wiseman, Jacqueline. "Close Encounters of the Quasi-Primary Kind: Sociability in Urban Second-Hand Clothing Stores." *Urban Life* 8.1 (1979): 23–51.
- Zweizig, Douglas, and Brenda Dervin. "Public Library Use, Users, Uses: Advances in the Knowledge of the Characteristics and Needs of the Adult Clientele of American Public Libraries." *Advances in Librarianship* 7 (1977): 231–55.