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PUBLIC LIBRARIES AS SPACES SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF WELL-BEING



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KEYWORDS: Well-being. Culture. Public libraries. Cooperation. Social change.

ABSTRACT: **Thesis/Objective** – The aim of this article is to present the role of public libraries in supporting the well-being of their users. **Research methods** – The analysis is based on data collected through in-depth individual interviews conducted with library users (n=20) and library staff (n=15) in the

Pomeranian Voivodeship. **Results** – The evolution of public libraries toward the democratization of their institutional relationships with users significantly increases their attractiveness. Library staff play a crucial role in this process, fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing visitors' well-being. **Conclusions** – Public libraries serve as key platforms for social change, promoting well-being through non-profit, community- and relationship-based initiatives. Despite their potential, the role of libraries in creating conditions that support the development of well-being remains largely underutilized.

Public libraries perform a range of social functions, constituting a key element of the institutional cultural order. A significant aspect of library operations today is the creation and development of services that support the well-being of users. This article examines the relationship between libraries and well-being. The analysis highlights the role of public libraries in supporting the development of users' well-being. The article includes findings regarding institutional strategies for supporting well-being in public libraries. The analysis conducted for the purposes of this article allows for the formulation of conclusions regarding the impact of user participation in the life of public libraries on individual levels of well-being. This, in turn, allows for the identification of challenges that public libraries will face in the context of future development strategies and models for building relationships with users.

WELL-BEING AS AN ANALYTICAL CATEGORY

The category of well-being, due to its breadth, ambiguity, and multidimensionality, poses a challenge for researchers attempting to conceptualize and operationalize it. For the purposes of this analysis, a conceptualization of the term "well-being" has been adopted that assumes a division into two aspects: personal and social. The first dimension includes: emotional well-being, a happy life, vitality, resilience and self-esteem (self-esteem, optimism, resilience), as well as functioning (skills, autonomy, engagement, meaning and purpose in life). Social well-being, on the other hand, consists of social support, trust and a sense of belonging (Panek, 2015). This subjective understanding of well-being, based on the individual's feelings, allows for an assessment of the perceived level of life satisfaction. An important dimension of well-being understood in this way is also building relationships with others and caring for the quality of those relationships (Siedlecki et al., 2014). Components of subjective well-being include positive feelings, such as experiencing pleasure, as well as positive ways of functioning that allow for the realization of individual goals and life values (Oman, 2019).

Some researchers are critical of the existing body of research on well-being, arguing that it lacks an in-depth, qualitative perspective on the phenomenon – for example, by conducting ethnographic and autoethnographic studies or using participatory techniques. Consequently, research findings rarely focus on the meanings embedded within the various dimensions of well-being, leaving our understanding of the concept limited (Baldin, Bille, 2023). This concern stems from the fact that relying on a model of well-being research in which its level is estimated based on the self-reports of specific individuals (most often respondents in questionnaire surveys) may be regarded as methodologically questionable or even outright inadequate. At the same time, the value of well-being research lies in its critical perspective, which highlights the evident limitations of the neoliberal view of well-being understood as the increase in a trait or the volume of a given type of capital (Watson et al., 2023).

This way of thinking is consistent with a vision of well-being built on relationships with others. Such a perspective allows for viewing well-being through the lens of socialization, community, and shared interests (Atkinson, 2013). In this way, well-being can be developed not on the basis of consumerist narratives, but through actions undertaken in cooperation with others, in an open and inclusive community (Szejnwald Brown, Vergragt, 2016). This provides an effective antidote to the development of the “well-being industry,” which instrumentalizes the pursuit of life satisfaction, forces individuals to be entrepreneurial in their self-care, and creates strong pressure to succeed and maintain a fast-paced lifestyle (Davies, 2015).

CULTURAL ACTIVITY AND WELL-BEING

The understanding of well-being outlined above can be applied to studying the ways in which various forms of cultural activity are undertaken, including those related to participation in the institutional offerings of public libraries. In the context of this article, this concerns primarily participation in activities offered by cultural institutions and, more broadly, the consumption of cultural content and the social integration that takes place through cultural participation. Reflective thinking about the links between well-being and culture opens up the possibility of examining processes of socialization, sharing, and the search for community (Bachórz et al., 2019). It therefore becomes crucial to specify how cultural offerings should be designed to genuinely serve as a lever for well-being, and when and under what conditions this is possible. Analyzing the mutual relations between culture and well-being requires considering, on the one hand, various aspects of cultural activity,

the institutional conditions under which such activities are carried out, and the characteristics of their audiences, and on the other hand, the differences in the effect and durability of the impact of culture on well-being.

In the context of thinking about culture as a tool for supporting the development of well-being, it is worth noting that culture is subject to strong instrumentalizing pressures. The belief that “culture matters” implies – even if not explicitly – an orientation toward profit, preferably one that can be calculated and consumed (Hausner, 2021). In the case of culture, however, it is more justifiable to invest in achieving outcomes that are difficult to measure, such as subjectivity, community, and autonomy, rather than to adopt an economically driven perspective. Creating and maintaining relationships is a real, tangible outcome of cultural activity, one that can support communities in developing networks of support and striving toward what they themselves would define as a “good life” (Scott, Rowe, Pollock, 2018). A democratized culture, one that distances itself from reinforcing hierarchies and remains close to human experience, offers an opportunity to enhance well-being.

Utilizing culture as a tool to support the development of well-being can be a significant element in the functioning of the cultural sector. In rankings of factors influencing personal well-being, access to culture places third, surpassed only by health status and income level. It is, however, a more significant indicator than age, educational level, gender, or professional status (Grossi et al., 2011). The list of empirical evidence showing that culture can serve as an effective tool for building well-being is extensive. Numerous studies highlight the importance of culture for observed levels of well-being. These analyses demonstrate that various formats and modes of cultural participation have a positive impact on both personal and social well-being. In the case of activities offered by libraries, this impact includes, among other things: improving quality of life (Chow, Tian, 2019), enhancing mental health (Zanal Abidin, Shaifuddin, Wan Mohd Saman, 2021), increasing happiness (Hider et al., 2022), strengthening social capital within local communities (Wojciechowska, 2021), raising levels of social trust (Vårheim, 2014), and increasing civic engagement (Coward, McClay, Garrido, 2018).

The long list of examples demonstrating positive relationships between cultural activity and well-being does not mean that culture is a universal tool for changing life circumstances and increasing personal and social well-being. There are conditions that increase the likelihood of successful cultural interventions. However, there is no guarantee that such actions will always yield the desired results. The significance of the role played by a given type of cultural activity or cultural institution in achieving specific well-being outcomes also remains ambiguous. Cultural activity may not

have a substantial impact on well-being, or it may generate only short-term effects (Węziak-Białowolska, 2016). Moreover, designing culture as a tool for well-being relies more on its preventative than on its therapeutic function. In other words, maintaining well-being through participation in culture may prove easier than recovering or rebuilding it at a later stage (Clift, Phillips, Pritchard, 2021). The moderate effects of culture as a tool for strengthening well-being stem from the fact that access to opportunities for cultural participation is not fully inclusive. Limited access to cultural participation is, in turn, a consequence of the level of social capital and the density of social networks (Gotthardt et al., 2023).

WELL-BEING IN THE OFFERINGS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Cultural institutions serve as important socialization spaces for individuals engaging in cultural activities. Public libraries play a key role in this process, enabling the shared experience of culture and the exchange of cultural encounters. By assuming this role, they become places where programs aimed, among other things, at supporting the development of well-being are implemented. Although library offerings are not always directly designed to promote well-being, they can *de facto* fulfill such a function. Library programs are addressed, among others, to groups at risk of social exclusion or particularly vulnerable to discrimination. While libraries differ in their effectiveness in reaching individuals from vulnerable groups, there is a noticeable increase in reflection on the need to incorporate proposals for such audiences into institutional strategies (Pfeifere, 2023). However, the development of extensive scenarios and action plans specifically aimed at increasing the well-being of users, including those from disadvantaged groups, remains relatively rare (Feld, 2020). In recent years, this situation has changed due to two crises: the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. During this period, many cultural institutions faced the task of protecting those most vulnerable to the negative effects of social upheavals. As a result, public libraries have increasingly become spaces of inclusion, integration, and democratization (Johnston et al., 2024).

Libraries implement various types of activities that contribute to well-being, although their thematic scope, format, and purpose may differ. From the perspective of this analysis, what is crucial is not so much the content of the offerings themselves, but rather their function, and consequently the role that public libraries play as places for cultivating community, acquiring skills, and transferring resources that contribute to an increased level of well-being. Libraries can fulfill this mission by offering space for meetings, dialogue, and the creation of innovative social

initiatives. They thus become not only a remedy for crises, but also a space for expressing creativity and learning through play for various groups of users. If they are to support the development of well-being, they should focus on the development of their users: training in new skills, exploring their emotions, or working through difficult experiences (Grimes, 2024). Such activities promote the reflective building of well-being, as they involve creating favorable conditions for being within the institutional setting, cooperating with others, and fostering attitudes of optimism, compassion, and hope (Latham, Cowan, 2023). The library sector thus acts as a facilitator of cooperation, a kind of incubator for networks based on partnership and collaboration. The result of implementing such a strategy is an increased sense of agency among users engaging in these activities, as well as a growth in their sense of empowerment. A model of library operation that emphasizes the need for collaboration also transforms the way relationships between the institution and its users are understood. These connections are becoming more democratized, built on a decentralized network model rather than on hierarchical relationships of superiority and subordination in which the user cannot negotiate the terms of their participation in the institutional offer (Popławska, 2022).

The focus on developing cooperation, which is essential to this transformation of libraries, may serve as a remedy for the atrophy of community characteristic of the culture of individualism (Jacyno, 2007). It is not the emancipation of individuals but interpersonal communication – through which value is created – that has become the missing resource hindering or even preventing the achievement of various social goals, including maintaining and enhancing well-being (Hausner, 2021). Community processes are rooted in critical reflection, which makes it possible to recognize different points of view, engage in dialogue, and develop unconventional solutions. These are signs of an inclusive culture in which well-being plays an important role as one of the aims of undertaken activities (Pasterak, Studziński, 2023). An inclusive public library fosters well-being through a thoughtfully designed model of cooperation. It is defined by non-hierarchical structures, relational closeness, mutual respect, and acceptance. Under such conditions, those representing libraries become empathetic and responsible “craftspeople of cooperation” taking responsibility for the development of reciprocal relationships (Kaszyński, 2021).

AIM AND METHOD

This article was inspired by the results of research on the condition of public libraries and readership in the Pomeranian Voivodeship conducted in 2022-2023 in cooperation with The Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski

Voivodeship and City Public Library in Gdańsk. The aim of the research was to gain knowledge about the reading practices of library users and to analyze institutional operating models aimed at supporting the involvement of residents in library activities. The research material was published in two reports summarizing the collected results (Stachura, Zbieranek, 2022; Stachura, Zbieranek, 2023). However, the published results do not include detailed considerations of the relationship between libraries and well-being. This issue has been analyzed for the purposes of this article, whose main objective is to explain the role that public libraries play in supporting the development of well-being.

As part of the study, in the first year (2022), an analysis of existing data concerning the condition of Pomeranian public libraries and the state of readership in the region was carried out. At the same time, a quantitative study was conducted among three groups of respondents: active participants in cultural life (n=569), professional staff of public libraries in the Pomeranian Voivodeship (n=328), and representatives of local government responsible for designing and implementing local cultural policy (n=82). The conclusions from this research formed the basis for developing the concept of the second phase of the project, implemented in 2023. This phase involved qualitative research – ethnographic studies of initiatives related to the operation of public libraries in the Pomeranian Voivodeship (n=5) and individual in-depth interviews (n=48). The aim of the ethnographic research was to examine what actions are being undertaken by public libraries in the Pomeranian region to modernize their services and adapt them to user expectations.

The research results presented below are based on the analysis of material from individual in-depth interviews conducted in the second phase of the project. A total of 35 interviews were included in the analysis, conducted with active participants in cultural life (n=20) and with library staff (n=15). Empirical material from interviews with representatives of local governments (n=13) was not included in the analysis. This was because the interview script for this group did not address issues related to library strategies concerning the well-being of their users. Including empirical material obtained from two groups of participants made it possible to compare different voices, representing distinct perspectives and understandings of the role that public libraries play in supporting the development of well-being. Interviews with active participants in cultural life addressed, among other things, issues related to the evaluation of library services, the way in which public libraries are used, and expectations regarding the format of institutional activities. Interviews with staff, on the other hand, made it possible to explore topics such as how libraries build relationships with users, how they organize their offerings, and how they seek new, interactive forms of activity and cooperation.

During the qualitative research, a purposive sampling method was used for participants in both subgroups. Active participants in cultural life were defined as individuals who regularly use library services. They were reached in two ways – through library staff and using the snowball sampling technique, whereby individual users recommended others for participation. The selection of interviewees proceeded in stages to ensure a high level of diversity in the research sample based on several factors: subregion within the Pomeranian Voivodeship (Chojnice, Gdańsk, Słupsk, Starogard, or the Tricity), size of place of residence, age, gender, and professional status. Among the library users, 12 women and 8 men took part in the study, and the sample was clearly diverse in terms of the age of interviewees. The interviewees included: teachers (6), sales representatives (3), a business consultant, an engineer, an accountant, a security guard, a childcare provider, a researcher, an office worker, a legal advisor, a firefighter, a professional soldier, and a person not currently in employment. It should be emphasized that one of the major difficulties in the research process was the recruitment of younger people and men – as they are noticeably less involved in the life of public libraries in local communities than women and older people. Despite support from individual libraries in recruiting participants, the study included people who described their experiences with many different library facilities. Moreover, the narratives point not only to the strengths but also to the weaknesses of public library functioning, avoiding idealization of the services or operational models of the institutions visited by the study participants.

Among public library employees there were significantly more women (n=12) than men (n=3). This reflects the strong feminization of the library sector, including at the managerial level (the interviews primarily involved individuals holding managerial positions in libraries). The criteria for selecting interviewees included – similarly to the case of active participants in cultural life – the subregion within the province, the size of the place of residence, and diversity in terms of the characteristics of the libraries with which the interviewees were associated (such as the level of infrastructure, the scope of cultural offerings, or involvement in local social initiatives).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The collected empirical material makes it possible to identify four key elements that determine the importance of public libraries as spaces supporting the development of well-being. The following aspects are described: the relational dimension of well-being built on relationships with others; the importance of public libraries as spaces for creating well-

being; socio-demographic differences in the use of library services that shape the potential for enhancing well-being; and the structural limitations of supporting well-being in public libraries.

THE RELATIONAL DIMENSION OF WELL-BEING IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

A factor that encourages users to visit public libraries is the atmosphere that prevails within them. For many respondents, it is as important as the substantive quality of the services offered. When the staff are perceived as communicative and helpful – “reaching out to the user” – a visit to the library becomes an opportunity to talk, improve one’s mood, and feel a sense of connection with someone familiar and friendly. Well-being then emerges organically, in conditions of friendly interaction. These interactions may relate directly to reading experiences, but they may also revolve around the more prosaic elements of everyday life. As a result, being in the library is associated with familiar conversation and the natural exchange of day-to-day experiences. This is well illustrated by the excerpts below from two seniors participating in the study. For older adults, a visit to the library is a particularly valuable experience – a cherished ritual that provides a great deal of satisfaction.

There’s such closeness and warmth here. It makes you want to come. (...) I’m happy that I’m on my way there. (...) Those ladies drive by in their cars and honk at me when they see me on the street. (...) That’s nice, that kind of contact. That you feel liked. And that they make an effort, that they have something for you, that you can... To me, it’s not an institution, (...) that’s how I feel about it. [18_U_M_60+]

Everyone in the library is smiling. I call and say, “good morning,” and they [*the library staff – author’s note*] reply, “good morning.” We exchange these little courtesies. I ask whether they have Olga Tokarczuk’s “Flights.” “Yes, we do. Would you like it?” I say, “Yes, please put it aside for me. I’ll drop by in a few days.” (...) It’s a chance to meet people. If I go to a bookstore, I’ll buy a book without talking to anyone. [19_U_F_60+]

The interviewees emphasize that visiting the library is a pleasant experience for them – something they look forward to. It offers not only the opportunity to borrow a particular book but, above all, to talk with the people who work in the library, to become involved in library life, for example by recommending the purchase of specific titles, participating in events organized at the library, or meeting other readers. Being in the library thus becomes a guarantee of time well spent and provides a sense of belonging to the library community. This type of experience fosters comfortable engagement and creates the feeling of taking part

in “something special,” additionally in comfortable, almost home-like conditions (Eriksson, Reestorff, Stage, 2018). Experiences based on interaction and the richness of personal contact are emotionally engaging (Gorchakova, Hyde, 2022), and ultimately have a positive effect on the experience of well-being.

I think that a library is a place that we share. That it is, by definition, a common good, that the library (...) serves the entire community. And the entire community also builds this common good. The librarian who works there builds this good, and so does the person who comes here. So we share everything we have, but we also share the space. (...) For me, this has much greater value than organizing activities where parents simply bring their children. Then there is no social impact. And for me, that is precisely the idea of nurturing this common good, this community in building the library as a shared place where you can meet and talk about everything, (...) organizing events, showing your passions, and passing those passions on. [6_L_F_40-59]

The inclusive atmosphere prevalent in public libraries fuels the development of well-being – both on a personal and social level. The relationship-oriented climate of interaction makes library users feel comfortable. Interviewees reported a sense of well-being resulting from visits to libraries and a feeling of satisfaction associated with the opportunity to meet other people interested in using library services. For some interviewees, contact with the library and its staff served as an antidote to feelings of loneliness or to difficulties associated with experiencing a life crisis.

Libraries are also meeting places for a wide range of interest groups. The activities they undertake allow not only for the socialization of reading experiences but also for the development of social networks. Importantly, libraries can provide users with meeting spaces on a non-commercial basis and for extended periods, enabling initiatives to grow within a stable institutional environment. This is the case, for example, with board-game clubs whose members regularly meet at the library to pursue their hobby. In reading clubs affiliated with public libraries in the Pomeranian Voivodeship, members support one other while discussing books and create a space for interaction that is not limited to the act of reading itself. The initiatives emerging in public libraries allow users to experience satisfaction from meeting others and positively affect their sense of group belonging. Activities undertaken in library spaces can also serve as a starting point for developing relationships and deepening social contacts outside the institutional environment. This pattern can be observed, for example, in the strongly feminized reading clubs, whose

members, after getting to know one another at the library, continue to maintain contact in other circumstances and locations.

We're not obligated to always meet in the library. Sometimes we just meet somewhere in a café. (...) When we get together, there's always some food, some sweets, or some coffee. (...) Everyone orders something so we can just sit and have a nice chat. We talk for an hour, two hours, even three. (...) About the book we've read, but we also talk about other things. When you're in a group that knows each other quite well, other topics naturally come up. For several years now, it has become a tradition for us to have a summer meeting in the garden of one of the club members. When the weather is nice, warm and pleasant, (...) it's just become customary for us to meet at one of our friends' homes. [17_U_F_40-59]

THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES AS SPACES SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF WELL-BEING

Public libraries support the development of well-being in several different ways. Their accessibility and the quality of the library infrastructure are of fundamental importance. In the interviews conducted, study participants frequently emphasized the lack of opportunities for social and cultural activities in their local communities. Against this backdrop, libraries are key institutions that enable residents to connect with culture and meet others. This situation is particularly acute for people living in small towns located on the periphery of larger urban centers. Public libraries, sometimes the only cultural institutions in a given municipality, also become the most attractive places to spend free time outside work and household duties.

It is important that the spaces in which users come into contact with the institution are perceived by them as friendly and inviting. A high quality of library infrastructure translates into a more positive assessment of the facilities and a greater willingness to visit them. Locating libraries in attractive buildings, equipping them well, and developing a variety of activities for users all encourage engagement in library life and ultimately increase the likelihood of a positive impact on individual well-being.

We livened up this space a little, made it warmer. We introduced a wishing tree where children could write down their ideas. It was an actual, physically constructed tree made by an artist. Later, when we grew a bit tired of the tree, we created a relaxation corner between two walls, like a kind of tent. And it is a space with blankets and pillows – a place for relaxation. Very often, children come to the bookshelf, pick something that interests them, and simply lie on the cushions in this tent, reading, looking at pictures, and pleasantly spending their free time. [4_L_F_40-59]

The collected empirical material confirms the thesis that public libraries promote the development of well-being by carrying out activities that are not profit-oriented and that emphasize the importance of community and relationality. They allow their users to experience the pleasure of being in the library, spending time in the institution's space in ways consistent with their expectations and needs. A significant role in this process is played by library staff, perceived by many participants as friendly and supportive. When libraries are viewed positively, they become an important point of reference in users' lives – a space where they can feel safe and to which they willingly and regularly return.

An important function of public libraries in supporting the development of well-being lies in developing new models of operation and new ways for users to engage in library life. Many institutions are reorganizing their work practices, striving to improve the quality of interaction with their users. Libraries are also taking over some of the tasks traditionally performed by community centers. This process is multidimensional and entails various strategic consequences for the institutions. From the perspective of this analysis, what is crucial is that by expanding the range of activities they offer, libraries seek to respond to users' needs, encouraging them to participate and ensuring optimal conditions for interaction.

LIBRARY WELL-BEING, BUT FOR WHOM?

According to data from the Central Statistical Office for 2023, the number of registered users of public libraries amounted to 6.3 million, and a total of 58.4 million visits were recorded (GUS, 2024). However, these statistics do not clearly show what forms of activity users engage in beyond borrowing collections, nor do they reveal the actual nature of users' interaction with library institutions. A quantitative survey conducted in the Pomeranian Voivodeship in 2022 among active participants in cultural life indicates that women, people declaring poor or average material conditions in their households, individuals over the age of 40, and those living outside the regional center (the Tricity and the Gdańsk subregion) – mostly in rural areas or small towns – use library services more frequently (Stachura, Zbieranek, 2023). With regard to gender, these findings are supported by a clear predominance of women over men in self-reported visits to public libraries in a survey conducted by the National Library (Koryś, 2023).

The data gathered through individual in-depth interviews largely confirm this statistical picture. Although public libraries seek to create offerings for diverse user groups, the narratives of both library staff and library visitors point to greater institutional activity among older adults and women, while simultaneously highlighting the limited presence of younger users and men in the libraries. This lower level of engagement is the main factor restricting the possibility of deriving individual benefit

from library participation. This is primarily due to two reasons: structural barriers that hinder access to institutional services, and personal decisions made by individuals who choose not to visit libraries and spend time there.

The empirical material indicates that library engagement has a particularly positive effect on the well-being of older adults. They appreciate the opportunity to use library services, which are relatively easy to access and free of charge. They also value the sense of inclusiveness associated with being in the library and the friendly atmosphere of interaction. Most seniors are not constrained by work-related obligations. Those who visit libraries meet their needs for social contact and meaningful use of time, which translates into higher perceived well-being. Seniors tend to treat their presence in the library in a non-instrumental way – as an important element of everyday life that supports their well-being.

The library is attractive because its services are free. The average Polish pensioner doesn't have much money, and if they want to participate in something, they have to travel to Bydgoszcz, for example, to the opera or the theatre. (...) It's quite a trip by bus, and returning after such a performance is around 1 a.m. Some people, even for health reasons, simply can't manage these outings. (...) What remains locally are the library and the community center, which seniors like very much. [29_U_F_40-59]

Individuals from groups other than seniors also benefit from participating in library offerings, including young mothers who attend events organized for children, hobby groups who can pursue their interests at the library, and – in the case of media libraries – enthusiasts of new digital technologies. A new group making use of library services consists of people with migration and refugee experience. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the scale of needs in this group increased substantially (Fedorowicz-Kruszewska, Kruszewski, 2023). This development is noted by library staff, users, and co-creators of library programming alike.

They opened up to the Ukrainian community in the city. Especially in those first days of the war crisis, when these women were truly very lost, there was a place where a woman who knew Ukrainian would come. There was an information point and things like that – things I don't personally use, but I see them. [24_U_F_18-39]

Ukrainians make extensive use of our resources. We also run language courses for them. Now there are perhaps fewer refugees, but more people who are leaving Ukraine and coming here. [13_L_F_40-59]

After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, we focused on language-independent games. It doesn't matter whether someone speaks English,

Ukrainian, or Polish – we can set up the game and play together. These games don't have any lengthy text, or any text at all. There are only pictures that don't require translation. Additionally, I printed the instructions in English, Ukrainian, and Russian, because there was a demand for it. Everyone can have the instructions in a different language and we can play the game together. [28_U_M_18-39]

Libraries also strive, as far as their resources allow, to respond to the needs of people with specific support requirements, such as individuals with mobility impairments, people with visual impairments, those living with chronic illness, people experiencing mental health difficulties, or individuals in homelessness. It is worth noting, however, that providing professional service and support to members of these groups can constitute a significant challenge for library staff.

We have more and more readers who struggle with various mental health difficulties. And it's not that we see one in a million – we see these people every day. They come to us, and we try to serve them and find common ground with them, although sometimes we have trouble doing so. [13_L_F_40-59]

Interviews with public library employees indicate that the group most difficult to encourage to participate actively in library life are young adults (under 30). Their patterns of cultural participation are largely based on consuming cultural content without institutional mediation. Challenges also arise in engaging people who are very professionally active. Another difficulty is developing program formats that would be more appealing to men.

STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS IN SUPPORTING WELL-BEING IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Despite the transformations that cultural institutions – including public libraries – are currently undergoing, many of them are still not designed in ways that adequately respond to the needs of diverse user groups (Sokka, Ruokolainen, Tohmo, 2023). This significantly limits their ability to support the well-being of certain users. One way libraries can begin to address this challenge is by working to better understand the needs of their audiences and, as a result, increasing the level of institutional self-reflection. Under such conditions, it becomes easier to invite users into forms of collaboration that may positively influence their well-being. However, the everyday realities of library functioning – marked by underfunding, staffing shortages, and the logistical challenges of organizing work – make undertaking such efforts considerably more difficult. Many libraries have limited capacity to develop their organizational cultures, as they operate

under constant pressure to prove their usefulness (Derfert-Wolf, 2015) and to fight for survival (Głowacka, 2015). Their core activity is therefore focused primarily on retaining existing users, rather than on developing innovative formats and models of operation.

There are moments when we simply lack the strength. (...) It's difficult because we lack resources. That's our everyday reality. We really do not have the capacity to create tailor-made solutions that would precisely meet the needs of our readers. [8_L_M_18-39]

In smaller, less developed institutions, additional events are organized relatively infrequently, and users are less likely to actively participate in library life. As a result, opportunities for the library's presence to have a positive effect on well-being occur much less often. A major problem for many libraries is their limited autonomy. These institutions are dependent on funding from local governments. More than 90% of all public library expenditures come from the organizer's budget (Jeziarska, 2018). This makes it difficult for libraries to develop long-term strategies and institutional development programs. The need to focus on ensuring the institution's basic functioning limits the capacity to create plans aimed, among other things, at developing spaces that support users' well-being.

This independence [of cultural institutions – author's note] is, in reality, a fictional concept. (...) I have been working in cultural institutions for 20 years, and I see what happens in the relationship between local government and cultural institutions – how often the organizer exceeds its competencies. (...) It really reflects a way of thinking about a cultural institution as if it were their own organizational unit. (...) They simply treat the institution as an agency for implementing their policies. (...) Cultural institutions today are so confused in terms of levels of influence, relationships, and dependencies that we no longer know when and what is permissible, and when and what we need to ask about. [10_L_F_40-59]

Limited resources for conducting activities (financial, human, and infrastructural), as well as the fragile structural foundations underlying their operation, hinder the development of offerings aimed at strengthening users' well-being. The insufficient operational capacity of public libraries may impede the process of changes intended to support users in actively participating in institutional culture. Without stable support from the organizing body responsible for public library operations, the ability of these institutions to develop ambitious strategic projects becomes uncertain. Narrowing the scope of activities to the fulfillment of basic, routine functions negatively impacts the role they can play as institutions supporting the development of users' well-being.

CONCLUSIONS

The empirical data collected indicates that public libraries can play a significant role in the ecosystem supporting the development of their users' well-being in both personal and social dimensions. Their offerings have the potential to support emotional well-being, increase users' engagement in group activities, and improve their sense of social support. Participation in activities organized by public libraries can have a positive impact on the life satisfaction of those involved in cultural life and contribute to strengthening social capital resources.

Public libraries undertake a range of activities aimed at fostering users' well-being by "reaching out" to them, maintaining friendly interactions, and showing a genuine willingness to meet and connect. While collective activities and support for grassroots initiatives do not guarantee a positive effect on well-being, they constitute an important factor in enabling such outcomes. Libraries develop pathways toward well-being that are relational and community-oriented, rather than focused on delivering quick benefits or merely satisfying consumer needs. This is achieved by enabling users to experience meaningful encounters with others, thereby fostering a sense of enrichment and emotional engagement.

The shift observed in library institutions toward participation and collaboration with users can reshape the model of relations between institutions and their audiences. Networked interactions democratize institutional structures of dependency, opening new perspectives for creating spaces of social support and belonging. Above all, many of the libraries studied demonstrate a clear commitment to developing a more inclusive offer for diverse groups of users. The purpose of including users is to enable them to engage in activities perceived as valuable and meaningful, while also experiencing pleasure and joy from participating in culture within a safe and welcoming environment. Public libraries thus play the role of both facilitators of cooperation and enablers of the conditions necessary for the development of well-being.

Many public libraries perform important functions within their local communities – above all integrative, educational, cultural, and recreational roles. Due to the deficit of institutional alternatives, libraries play a key role in building social ties. This is particularly true for smaller towns located on the periphery of larger urban centers. The widespread availability of public libraries and the possibility of using their resources free of charge make them important agents of social change. At the same time, many of these institutions struggle with structural problems, which limits their ability to carry out activities that support the development of well-being. As a result, such activities are not systemic in nature. Their character and scale depend on the resources available to libraries and on their capacity

to address the challenges of strategic development. Different groups of users also engage with library-based activities to varying degrees, which results both from the offer provided by libraries and from the individual preferences of users.

The examples presented in the text show that public libraries can become important spaces for supporting the development of well-being. Their fundamental value lies in undertaking activities that are not programmed with the aim of generating economic profit and that exceed the logic of privatized consumption and individual gain. The task facing libraries is connected to their ability to navigate constantly changing conditions. This concerns, above all, the need to cooperate with the entities that finance their activities, to understand the expectations of various groups of users of the institutional offer, and to skillfully develop strategic solutions aimed at professionalizing institutional operations. The potential of libraries as agencies for strengthening well-being, although partially recognized, remains largely untapped.

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