A place for all? A qualitative study exploring how legacies of exclusion impact library engagement

by

Michaela R. Saunders

B.A., Iowa State University, 2003
M.L.S., Washburn University of Topeka, 2015

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Leadership Communication
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Abstract

This community-engaged qualitative study explored a knowledge gap in understanding about how the past – specifically a history of *de facto* segregation within community spaces – has shaped current reality of public library utilization in the state capital micro-urban city of Topeka, Kansas. Interviewing patrons of library-partnered organizations in the geographic area of a potential future library branch allowed them to share lived-experience narratives of past and current library use and reveals their needs and hopes. These experiences and opinions can aid library leaders in their decision-making.

Social infrastructure in the United States was designed by white people to serve white people. In the specific context of public libraries, which were established to advance self-help and civic participation, almost no scholarly attention has been given to the ways that past exclusions influence how Black, Indigenous, and other people of color think about, experience, and use these spaces and their services. Thus, the most basic questions of how library leaders might redress continued inequities and inequality remain unconsidered. Such work is required, through leadership action. Until society – and social infrastructure leaders in particular – intentionally recognize and support cultural norms beyond those of structural whiteness, exclusion will continue. Therefore, I sought to understand the lived experiences of library patrons, letting their stories of library engagement speak for how they think, and feel, about their library experiences. My study sought to investigate, specifically:

RQ1: Why do residents choose to engage or not with their local public library?

RQ2: In what ways do historical legacies of exclusion impact these choices?

I found, in the context of the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library (TSCPL), minoritized patrons interviewed do not feel overtly excluded by or in the library. The findings of

this research nevertheless demonstrate psychological and geographic relationality are key to feelings of comfort and ease within the library, and both willingness and ability to access the library. Our society prioritizes car-based travel, and communities – including Topeka, Kansas – created or settled for public transit systems that include transportation deserts. Transportation barriers are barriers to full community participation. The stories shared by group interviewees illuminated the complex interconnectedness and continuing echoes of governmental policy, social and internalized expectations, and the prioritization of some residents at the expense of others in city planning and social infrastructure development and decision-making.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Colene J. Lind

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A special thank you to my son, head of the hype-crew! Thank you for rolling with so much. I am proud of you and so grateful for your encouragement and conviction that I could do something "huge and awesome!" As many stars in the sky!

Finally, my interest in social infrastructure would not exist without seeds planted in my childhood. During bus rides with my Granny, I learned to read a timetable and to understand that where the bus doesn't go, you walk. She was a non-driver who always wanted me to have good choices to make, and she would be joyful in my choice to pursue my education to this level. Similarly crucial were the formative library experiences created for me by my parents and Mrs. Henry. Unfortunately, Dad walked on before I became a graduate student or a teacher, but I know he is glad for it all. I am here because our frequent trips to the public library, and university library – as he studied and I escaped in a book – grew from quality time into greater purpose. I'll never forget the trip to the medical library with Mom that crazy summer because I was so curious. Finally, Pat Henry was "my librarian" in elementary school. She dedicated 40+

years of her professional career to school librarianship and was the first librarian to recommend a book to me that sat on a shelf higher than I could reach. I'm forever grateful she kept nudging me toward great stories, and that she always wanted the library to feel like magic for all of us.

Dedication

For Clark. And for everyone who understands that curiosity *and* access are the root.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

> "A library is a rainbow in the clouds."
> ~ Maya Angelou, October 2010, at New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (NYPL, 2010)

Maya Angelou loved public libraries and demonstrated that love through word and her deed. In 2010, the literary icon donated her personal papers, including letters and manuscripts, to the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. At the ceremony to mark the gift, when she was 82, Angelou spoke about the hope the library gave her as a child. Around the time of her gift announcement, New York Public Library staff interviewed Angelou about how libraries influenced her life. She recalled reading every book in the library she could access as a child: "Of course, it was a small Black school in a village in Arkansas, so there couldn't be more than a few hundred books" (Montefinise, 2010, para. 3). Continuing: "I always knew from that moment … in any town, if I can get to a library, I'll be OK." (Montefinise, 2010, para. 5).

While Angelou celebrated the transformative power of libraries in her own life, she saw as equally powerful what libraries can do for everyone (Montefinise, 2010, para 15):

> Information is so important, and it must be open. Information helps you to see that you're not alone. … So the library helps you to see, not only that you are not alone, but that you're not really any different from anyone else. There may be details that are different, but a human being is a human being.

For generations before and during Angelou's own life, access to libraries across the United States was reserved for white readers, by law, tradition, or both. The influence of the creation of libraries by white community members to serve white community members lingers. Today, public libraries proudly assert that "Libraries are for Everyone," but too little is known about

who is opting out of library use and why. What happens when decisions made over time by those in authority make it harder for some residents to access the library in the present? What is lost in a community – and to the world – when access is not attainable?

What follows is an explanation of a community-engaged, qualitative study addressing these questions of access. Legacies of exclusion permeate today's civic life, yet access to social infrastructure including libraries is crucial to community participation, democracy, and civic engagement. In the coming sections of this chapter, I develop a case that such study is necessary and briefly explain the methods that allow community members to share their experiences. I also outline how findings of this study may guide library leaders to act toward ensuring the social infrastructure organizations they steward really are for everyone. Finally, I provide a chapter-by-chapter explanation of what is to come.

Know better, do better

The legacy of intentional racial exclusion created by policy and enforced by law, tradition, or both throughout the United States continues to contribute to social disparities today. One of those disparities is making the "Right to the City" (Lefebvre, 1968) and its services harder to exercise for intentionally minoritized and marginalized community members (Alexander, 2020; D.A. Bell, 1992; DeGruy, 2017; Freire, 2005; Katznelson, 2005; Kendi, 2016; Lefebvre, 1968; McIntosh, 1988; Mitchell, 2020; Rothstein, 2017). Social infrastructure in the United States – specifically publicly funded libraries, parks, and transit – was originally designed to serve white citizens (Klinenberg, 2018; Rothstein, 2017). From inception these community assets provided overtly disparate service access and delivery through intentional exclusion based in law, tradition, or both (Rothstein, 2017; Wilson, 1995). While U.S. public libraries were legally desegregated by the late 1960s, *de facto* segregation throughout communities remains and

is made evident by persistent residential segregation and municipal investments in new developing rather than long-established neighborhoods (Dunkelman, 2014; Knott, 2015; Marohn, 2019; Rothstein, 2017).

Libraries, parks, and transit were logical and important protest sites during the Civil Rights Movement precisely because they were tax-funded community assets that intentionally excluded or offered disparate access or service based on race (Kirk, 2014; Retzlaff, 2021; Wiegand & Wiegand, 2018). That history is now legacy, which cloaks social infrastructure organizations. Today, exclusion is not as often overt, but the compound effects of the United States's refusal to recognize itself as a settler-colonial society and normative/structural whiteness, as well as policy decisions made or settled for by individual municipalities and states, create neighborhoods of more or fewer assets (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2021; Efird, et al., 2024; Giddens, 1998; Kendi, 2019a; Young, 1990).

Eric Klinenberg (2018, p. 5) defines social infrastructure in *Palaces for the People* as "the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact," and writes that social infrastructure is "crucially important, because local, face-to-face interactions … are the building blocks of all public life." Klinenberg directly addresses neither the legacy of systemic inequity within social infrastructure nor the role of social infrastructure leadership in changing their institutions. Thus, a broad survey of inclusion and equity in all social infrastructure is justified, especially those institutions funded primarily by tax dollars that aid community livability – libraries, parks, and transit. Public schools have been analyzed exhaustively. While studied less often, scholars have considered the ways actions in the present, rooted in systemic racism, contribute to making parks unequally open to all (Mullenbach et al., 2022; Williams, 2020). Williams (2020), as an example, considers how statues of confederate generals in public parks

are microaggressions. While libraries are only one part of a community's public sphere and social infrastructure, the existence of the library as a profession, as a service, and as a place, allows it to be considered independently of other community institutions. Most importantly, as I will detail, scholars and practitioners know little about who is not using public libraries today and why.

Other scholars have called for critical investigation of libraries' egalitarian rhetoric versus reality. Speaking to their professional colleagues, librarians of color within academic medicine wrote an impassioned reflection after George Floyd's murder, calling for consideration of power dynamics within the library and between library staff and patrons (Ossom-Williamson et al., 2021). They encourage libraries to take on the work of anti-racism through a commitment to start now, not "when you're ready" (p. 143). They encourage librarians toward acknowledgement of white supremacy, rebuilding trust among colleagues, and between staff and patrons. Further, they suggest conducting audits of power (who uses it, how, and for what purpose), and structural inventories to analyze processes, forms, and communications of all kinds, as well as financial obligations associated with access. They make the case for action thusly:

> Each step taken or not taken today has a substantial and lasting effect on the Black people who work in, visit, or are otherwise impacted by each library. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to intentionally implement changes that truly address and reverse these pervasive oppressive inequities. (Ossom-Williamson et al., 2021 p. 141)

Documenting what has happened and is happening regarding the legacy of intentional exclusion and its impacts on the lives of community residents today is crucial to making

progress. As Angelou is often quoted as saying: “Do the best you can until you know better. When you know better, do better.” Now that we as society know better, how can libraries and library leaders best meet the challenge to do better?

I set out to complete this research with the goal of making progress on that question for libraries and for society at large. Based on the lived experience of 31 interviewees, one library building for a community the size of Topeka does not create equitable opportunity of access to experience the phenomenon of being in the library. Auxiliary library services, including regularly scheduled Bookmobile stops and a specialty service for seniors known as mobile Red-Carpet, are experienced by interviewees as necessary and valuable. But for these services many patrons would have no access at all to the library. Still these patrons recognize auxiliary services do not replicate the experience of being in the library. Additionally, childhood experiences in the library are powerful and formative. My findings inform the growing understanding of the public library as a phenomenon (Norberg-Schulz, 2012; Prizeman, 2012; IFLA-UNESCO, 2022). These findings also call for consideration of and action to enhance public transportation networks, increase walkability, and add community assets to under-resourced neighborhoods specifically to increase opportunity of access.

The remainder of this chapter provides necessary information regarding the following: the role of social infrastructure in communities; who visits the library according to data of national scope; what the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library is considering and the neighborhoods from which interview participants were sought; and the research questions of this study and contributions the study makes.

Do the right work

All social infrastructure potentially contributes to stronger communities, but libraries directly support two requirements of democracy: civic participation and personal economic advancement. Yet we know surprisingly little about who is using the library, who is not, and why. In the following section, I explain why social infrastructure access, and in particular library access, is crucial to a civically engaged life. I address why understanding and ameliorating access and service gaps is so important, as well as how these gaps are perpetuated by legacies of exclusion by design. Finally, I explain the goals of this study in collaboration with library leadership in my community.

"Social infrastructure provides the setting and context for social participation, and the library is among the most critical forms of social infrastructure that we have," explains Klinenberg (2018, p. 32), a sociologist. The public library is an intermediary or knowledge broker, "critical to supporting the flow of information" to community members (Goulbourne & Yanovitzky, 2021, p. 30). Knowledge brokers can increase awareness, accessibility, engagement, linkage, and mobilization around, for example, vital health information, among community members who utilize them (Goulbourne & Yanovitzky, 2021). As John Dewey reminds, it is the ability to *participate* with fellow community members *in* democracy that has the power to break down barriers. As Dewey (1916, p. 91) notes:

> A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of

> class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.

Therefore, systemic barriers to accessing the services provided by and in the public library create unequal access to community participation and democratic participation. This may contribute to inequitable quality of life expectations and experiences among residents of the same community, who each are taxpayer investors in the library itself.

Normative public culture of the United States includes a longstanding commitment to libraries as sites of equal and unfettered access to information, with the first free public library supported with taxation founded in Peterborough, New Hampshire in 1833 (Leach & Stillwell, 2023). The American Library Association was founded in 1876 "on the core principles of democracy and egalitarianism … [as] safe places where individuals could come and have free access to all information regardless of their ideologies, beliefs or ethics" (Chancellor, 2019, p. 50). In Topeka, Kansas, the free lending library dates to 1878. And yet, the community-based funding model and egalitarian founding principles were not enough to ensure the benefits of the library could reach all community members equally. Topeka was not alone. "The early libraries, with their promise of liberty and freedom, solidified and perpetuated the separation of races and that nonwhite groups could not participate in the public sphere. This was reinforced and defined through racialized laws and local library policies" (Mehra & Grey, 2020 p. 198). In many communities including in Kansas and Missouri, library service provided through schools let the library administration avoid taking a position on who could access what, but social convention and legal school segregation meant restricted access (Roe & Reeves, 2024; Wiegand, 2024). Further, the ALA adopted its first "Library Bill of Rights" in 1939 but took no position on library

segregation (Mathiesen, 2015). Two months later, five young Black residents staged the first public library sit-in in protest of segregated library service in Alexandria, VA. (ALA, 2018).

Today, estimates suggest more than 97 percent of Americans live in a library service area, and just over half of all Americans are registered library users (ALA, 2024; IMLS, 2024b). On average, registered users visit the library between 1.4 and nearly 5 times per year (ALA, 2024; IMLS, 2024b; Horrigan, 2015). While physical book and media circulation is declining, access of digital resources and in-person programming is rising (IMLS, 2024b; ALA, 2024). Thus, nearly half of the population is not benefiting from the public sphere of the library. Arguably, for the sake of our democracy, the health of our society, and for the benefit of each community member seeking information, education, or other opportunities, that proportion of non-engagers is far too high.

Simultaneously, little is known about the race and class of library patrons – and next to nothing of those opting out. Some studies demonstrate orientation to the library and meet-and-greet programs with librarians sustainably increase library use by university students (Essien, et al., 2021), but no such programming was offered during desegregation – as myriad policy actions worked to create new reasons for the maintenance of the status quo. What limited research exists suggests middle-class library patrons visit more frequently than those earning less and are more likely to use the library for leisure activity. Lower-income patrons most often use the library to complete tasks, such as job applications, internet research, or communicating with others (Aptekar, 2019; Berman, 2005; Horrigan, 2015). Meanwhile, lower-income non-patrons are least likely to know libraries offer more than book lending (Coker, 1993; Rainie et al., 2007). A *Washington Post* analysis of a recent YouGov poll included influence of religious affiliation and political party on library use (Van Dam, 2024). With so little information available regarding

race and socioeconomic class of users, we know extraordinarily little about whether and why minoritized individuals are and are not accessing this social infrastructure.

While who, specifically, is using libraries and not using them remains in question, it is known that community assets, including libraries, contribute to equity within communities (Thorne Wallington, 2013). Neighborhoods nearest those assets are home to more residents who believe they have social capital in their neighborhood (Klinenberg, 2018; Kranich, 2001), better access to services that enrich their daily lives (Aptekar, 2019; Thorne Wallington, 2013), increased sense of belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2007) and positive influences to their overall health and feelings of wellbeing (Bruner, 2010). Additionally, more use of the library results in more trust of the library, and others who use it (Vårheim, 2014). Thus, if minoritized communities have unequal access to libraries, they are also less able to reap personal and civic benefits.

For at least four reasons, libraries are ripe sites for exploring the impacts of invisible barriers built by normative whiteness, neoliberal presumptions, and settler-colonial ideology. First, there is commonality in the nearly ubiquitous presence of libraries across urban, suburban, and rural communities, thanks to 19th and 20th century philanthropy, and the conviction across librarianship that access to knowledge and information is crucial to a healthy democracy (ALA, 2024; PLA, 2023; Gregorian, 2019; Prizeman, 2012). This has been demonstrated by the rapid adaptation of libraries as internet access hubs during the dawn of the digital era and the COVID-19 pandemic (ALA, 2020; IMLS, 2024a; Thorne Wallington, 2013). Second, the prevailing narrative that libraries are and always have been open to all is being challenged within librarianship and research (ALA, 2018; Boyte, 2024; Knott, 2015; Stauffer, 2020; Wiegand & Wiegand, 2018; See Appendix E). Third, there are comparatively few BIPOC librarians, and it is

uncommon for libraries to seek input from those they are not serving regarding programming and service needs (Aptekar, 2019; Josey & Addullahi, 2002; Mehra & Gray, 2020; Pateman & Vincent, 2010; Scott, 2011; Stauffer, 2020). Fourth, the repeated history of libraries and librarians as targets of politically motivated censorship campaigns rooted in exclusion or denial of non-normative community members – from suspected communist authors to children's books featuring multi-racial or LGBTQIA2S+ families – demonstrates a recognition of libraries as knowledge brokers and cultural influencers (Mehra & Jaber, 2023; Mipro, 2023; Wiegand, 2020; Wiegand & Wiegand, 2018; White House, 2025a; White House, 2025c).

These same reasons also support scholarly investigation of the role of library leadership in advancing or impeding institutional change. How can a library system that is considering the possibility of a new branch location address past and present racial exclusions and better meet the needs of minoritized community residents? To know where to start, leaders must have a deep understanding of the patrons they intend to serve, as well as those community members who are opting out. This study will seek to shed light on the experiences of would-be patrons residing in the service area of a potential future library branch to understand how the past influences the future. Specifically:

1. Why do residents choose to engage or not with their local public library?
2. In what ways do historical legacies of exclusion impact these choices?

Community engagement, community voices

This study endeavored to increase knowledge that would allow library leaders to meet community-member needs more directly and completely. This community-engaged qualitative study was designed at the Collaborate level on the Kansas State University Continuum of Engaged Scholarship (KSU Office of Engagement, 2024) and intended to be collaborative,

critical, and transformative (Johnson, 2017). Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library leadership and staff collaborated with me on identifying research questions, engaged with community partners encouraging them to host group interviews, and supported recruitment of participants for those group interviews by providing a light meal for each. The library team did not have capacity to directly engage in conducting interviews or data analysis. The study utilized group interview to elicit individual experiences with the library in the past and present, as well as hopes related to an idealized future library space. In the remainder of this section, I provide historical context of the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library, an introduction to the geographic area of Topeka in which the study focused, and information about the study's design.

Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library as research partner

Little is known about how the Topeka library served minoritized community residents in its early history. A subscription-based Topeka Library Association became the Topeka Free Public Library and began receiving tax funding from the City of Topeka in 1878. In the first half of the 1880s, a library building was opened on the Capitol grounds. The only specific example of service to Topeka's non-white residents included in a 1970 Bulletin of the Shawnee County Historical Society commemorating the library's first 100 years are two pages about Langston Hughes visiting the library on the Capitol grounds at 7-years-old, in about 1909. Hughes lived in Topeka for a little more than a year, attending first grade, before moving to Lawrence to live with his grandmother. The library history Bulletin (Ripley & Richmond, 1970) suggests it may have been the library on the Capitol grounds that Hughes writes about in *The Big Sea* as the place where "books began to happen to me."

Further, a photo from 1961 included in the bulletin showed a multiracial crowd of children at a Topeka Zoo program hosted at the library (Ripley & Richmond, 1970, p. 87). The

history includes no photos or written description of the Mulvane Girls and Boys library, operated from 1939 until 1953, to indicate whether the facility was desegregated.

The Topeka Free Public Library partnered with local elementary and junior high schools as early as 1918, when Chester Woodward, a member of the Board of Education, was appointed to the Board of Library Trustees (Ripley & Richmond, 1970). By 1932 there were branches in six schools, including at Washington School. Washington School, at 1025 S.E. Washington in East Topeka, was one of four schools for Topeka's non-white children, kindergarten through eighth grade. Washington School closed in 1962.

As the 1970 Bulletin describes the school-based library branches (Ripley & Richmond, 1970, p. 93):

> These branches were open 9:30-5:30 on school days during the school year. Some were also open during the summer. They served adults as well as students, and were enthusiastically received by the communities. In 1941, the last full year of their operation, 55,996 books were borrowed from the branches.

Financial woes led to closing school-based branches in 1942, and a shift to bookmobiles in early 1943 with initially 10 stops per week by a converted horse trailer pulled by a coup.

Today, Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library operates bookmobile service that includes 16 stops per week (TSCPL, 2024b). The library's executive director recognizes that while the historical record leaves a lot of questions, the present and future require that the library work toward the idealistic motto, "Libraries are for Everyone" (ALA-LJ, 2018). Finalized in Spring 2024, the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library's new strategic plan identifies three areas of work that relate to the broad ideas of increasing the sense of ease and comfort felt by global majority patrons when they visit the library. First, increasing access to permanent library

space in the form of "satellite or co-location" (TSCPL, 2024a, p. 12); second, a request by patrons for "increased content and events by and for the Black community" (TSCPL, 2024a, p. 29); and third, a staff-identified need "to improve strategies to engage Spanish-speaking and Black community members" (TSCPL, 2024a, p. 28).

In partnership with my research effort, Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library leadership identified long-time community partners in the geographic locations in East Topeka that agreed to serve as host sites for group interviews. They are SENT Topeka, Inc, Topeka Housing Authority, Washburn Tech East, and LULAC Senior Center. Each of the organizations partnering with the library is located within neighborhoods designated by the City of Topeka as a Neighborhood Improvement Association (NIA). Only neighborhoods recognized by federal guidelines as under resourced have NIA designations (City of Topeka, 2024a and 2024b).

East Topeka is a collection of neighborhoods east of downtown and south of the Kansas River encompassing the ZIP codes of 66616, 66605 and 66607. East Topeka neighborhoods are recognized by the City of Topeka and by federal HUD and Title I education grant programs as under resourced. Several of these neighborhoods were once within separate municipalities, absorbed by Topeka through annexation. Oakland, which encompasses most of the 66616 ZIP code and some of 66607, has long been home to Latine residents, while Highland Park, which spans the 66605 and 66607 ZIP codes, has likewise been home to Black residents through generations. Both Oakland and Highland Park became part of Topeka city limits through annexation. Oakland was annexed in the 1920s and Highland Park in the late 1950s (City of Topeka, 2014; City of Topeka, 2015; HPCE, 2024). Many of the amenities promised at the time of annexation, including sidewalks and road improvements, have not been fully realized (City of Topeka, 2015; City of Topeka, 2014).

One of the library's participating community partners is in each of these ZIP codes, so I focus therein the following brief demographic summary (see Table 1.1). This summary intends to provide grounding context comparing the neighborhoods of East Topeka to the City of Topeka as a whole. A few details are worth highlighting here. All neighborhoods in 66607, which includes Washburn Tech East and most Topeka Housing Authority operated housing complexes, are in the Topeka city limits and designated as under resourced. In 66616, which includes the LULAC Senior Center, all neighborhoods within city limits are designated as under resourced, but some neighborhoods are in a suburban community with acreages. Finally, within 66605, which includes SENT Topeka, there is a mix of lakefront upper-middleclass neighborhoods and under-resourced neighborhoods.

Table 1.1. Topeka City in contrast to 66605, 66607, and 66616

2022 American Community Survey (Census.gov)

	Topeka City	66607	66605	66616
Median household income	$50,709	$27,410	$57,623	$50,795
Bachelor's degree +	28.2 %	6.4 %	20.0 %	15.9 %
Employment rate	55.1 %	43.7 %	58.7 %	65.1 %
Without healthcare	11.5 %	22.2 %	11.6 %	15.1 %
White alone	73 %	36.6 %	58.5 %	65.5%
Black alone	10.2 %	19.6 %	14.7 %	3.7%
Two + races	8.6 %	15.7 %	14.4 %	18.6%
In poverty	17.7 %	34.5 %	13.5 %	17.2 %

Research for Change

My lived experience has shown that a lot can be understood about a community by observing how well social infrastructure works for residents. Also telling are when, how, and where social infrastructure services fall short or do not exist at all. These observational learnings grew from deep roots. They include what I gained from regular visits to the library and local

parks with my father, and lessons from my grandmother about how the bus enabled and supported her independence as a nondriver. Further, my understanding of what community is, how to live in community with others, and how to challenge social systems that do not enhance or enable community flourishing reflects what was demonstrated time and again by Húŋkpapȟa, Isanti, Oglala, Sicangu, Miniconjou, Anishinaabe, Nueta, Hidatsa, Sahnish, Apsáalooke, Tsalagi, and Ho-Chunk family in the proverbial village that raised me. I am not a tribal citizen and do not present my work as Indigenous scholarship, but I heartly embrace the Indigenous ontologies that influence my understanding of the world.

With those understandings – that community requires work and those doing the labor must be recognized and understood as part of the whole – I embarked on community-engaged scholarship in the place I now call home, that being Topeka, Kansas. I am an engaged community member and patron of the library. I have a commitment to research with and for, rather than of or on, communities and community members, and I recognize each of us has unique and inequitable experiences in society. I have experienced library-based and librarian-facilitated transformative experiences in this community and other places I have lived. And I recognize my library experience is far from universal.

Until such transformative experiences are possible for everyone, community-engaged scholars, including me, are obligated to work in collaboration with others for improvement. This pursuit – of equity, justice, and the full ability to participate in the community – needs scholars who will use for good purpose their expertise and power (Dugan, 2017), calling out what can and must be changed, and making actionable recommendations to support community flourishing and democratic participation. As Freire wrote (2005, p. 87): “there is no transformation without action.”

This commitment to a critical and scholar-activist ethos informed the questions I investigated, the methods underpinning my study, and the way in which I prioritized preserving the words of the interviewees (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008; Zucker, 2016). From a critical constructivist epistemology (Bettencourt, 2012; Crotty, 1998; Kincheloe, 2005), this study used group interview with a hybrid of episodic narrative interview (Mueller, 2019) and information elicitation through semi-structured interview (Bhattacharya, 2017). Through a multi-level qualitative analysis, I focused on what interviewees communicated through the stories and information shared (Rogers, 2007; Tracy, 2020) with particular interest paid to domains of experience and relationality (Bennett & Vidal-Hall, 2000) with the library. I hope what results from this work can join other scholarship that centers "marginalized values so that they permeate and drive the execution of scholarly inquiry" (Museus & Wang, 2022, p. 27).

Contributions

In a local and most practical sense, the information learned through this study should informto decision-making regarding the future establishment, or not, of library branches within the studied community. The need to increase access to library space in the form of "satellite or co-location" (TSCPL, 2024a, p. 12) was identified through the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library's recent strategic planning process. But more information is needed before the library's board can seriously consider new facilities and all that come with them. Thus, this study most immediately contributes to my research partner's need for information as the library makes mission-critical decisions. The community-engaged research process utilized could be replicated in additional Topeka neighborhoods and other communities throughout the country to inform library leaders as they work to create spaces and places that truly serve the entire community.

In academic circles, the modern library has been studied within the frame of destination of choice, a term often used in tourism and urbanism (Hartwell et al, 2012; Levitt, 2020). The frame draws attention to the opportunities at hand in libraries during the evolution toward a balance of in-print and digitized collections since the early 2000s (Janse van Vuren & Latsky, 2009). The opportunity of a new library location aligns well with investigation of what it takes to become a destination of choice for would-be patrons. Such recommendations are included in this study. A destination of choice requires accessibility foremost. This study indicates the critical importance of increasing public transportation access for would-be patrons who do not live a walkable distance from a public library. This likely applies to other social infrastructure assets such as parks, pools, and trails as well. This finding directly identifies a crucial element of needed change to ensure libraries can become destinations of choice for community residents. Further, cities interested in increasing resident quality of life should prioritize reduction and elimination of transportation deserts, as transportation access is central to participation in our car-centric society. Social infrastructure stewards must collaborate to improve access for community residents to all the benefits provided by social infrastructure assets. Further, as the study indicates, lack of action to address transportation access perpetuates historic legacies of exclusion.

Therefore, this dissertation makes actionable recommendations to be taken by policymakers, funders, concerned residents, and scholar-activists such as myself. These are necessary steps toward recognizing and healing past harms, creating places that are destinations of choice for BIPOC patrons. Taking these steps protects democracy, advances the Rights to the City of all community members, provides equitable access to knowledge and self-improvement, and enriches community life. Such efforts build community, which is crucial amidst increasing

polarization. To do nothing is to accept the continued decline of civic life. To do something has implications for whole communities, for current library patrons and for those opting out, for libraries, librarianship, and even for BIPOC authors, and their stories.

Looking ahead

As this study began, I anticipated some interviewees would share constructive criticism about how they feel in the library, how much they see themselves reflected in the library, and even regarding what they are able to do in the library, at least in part related to normative whiteness. Instead, interviewees identified barriers to access as external to the library, but nevertheless complicating their ability to access the library. These identified barriers are multifaceted, systemic, and complex. Each is rooted in historic exclusionary policies that impact access to life outside their neighborhoods. The most profound is transportation access, an insight that will become clear via the following four chapters.

Chapter 2 is a literature review to both provide context and connect this work to several ongoing academic conversations. Specifically explored first is community life, the influence of governmentality on normative culture, and the importance of libraries within community. Next, I consider scholarship surrounding social infrastructure and what it tells us about how different communities engage with it. Finally, I introduce the theories of co-cultural communication and adaptive leadership, both of which advance the study's purpose and recommended actions.

Chapter 3 explains this study's methodology. In particular, I explore the research design and methods used in conducting the study. Here I describe the larger theoretical perspectives of this work as critical, qualitative, community-engaged research. The hybrid interview approach is detailed as well. Next, I elaborate the specifics of my collaboration with the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library, including relevant details regarding each of the interview host

organizations, and recruitment of interview participants with each host. Then I detail the data collection process and the different types of data I gathered throughout the study. Ultimately, I explain the multi-level coding and qualitative analysis process, as well as my ethical considerations and positionality.

Findings are presented in Chapter 4, with prioritization of the interviewee storytelling as related to five domains of experience shared relative to the public library: Introduction, Wonder, Knowledge, Proximity and Third-Place. Within each domain of experience, three themes are explored, and how those themes illustrate relationality with the library is detailed – as Finding, Feeling, Using, Relating, and Imagining. The chapter concludes with discussion of six key findings.

Finally, Chapter 5 considers implications and several options for next needed steps for libraries and their leaders (practitioners), grant-makers, policymakers, engaged community members, and scholars with community-engaged and other orientations.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

> "He loved this street, not for the people or the shops but for the stone lions that guarded the great main building of the Public Library, a building filled with books and unimaginably vast, and which he had never yet dared to enter. …"
> – James Baldwin, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*

Baldwin's young John Grimes thinks himself unworthy of the grand New York Public Library, primarily because "all the white people inside" would recognize John was notused to opulent spaces and "they would look at him with pity" (Baldwin, 1953, p. 35). John imagines if first he reads everything available in his frequently visited neighborhood library branch, he can earn "the poise to enter any building in the world." In Baldwin's depiction, the Harlem branch library is accessible, but the central library is out of reach because of unease for John created by societal and internalized pressures and expectations. What role do today's libraires have in addressing those feelings and challenging those expectations?

Before questions such as this can be explored, this literature review grounds the research in a fundamental understanding of the legacy of racial discrimination in the United States and its continuing impacts. As this review demonstrates, social infrastructure in the United States was designed by white people to serve white people. Consequently, civic life is experienced differently and unequally depending on one's racial identity and presentation. The generations-long consequences of systemic messages, subtle and overt, about who has power, preference, or privilege have consequences for how individuals internalize and experience a sense of safety, ease, and comfort regarding the places they venture within their city.

In this chapter I first provide an overview of community studies and planning approaches to understanding a community's livability, and how the professions approached equity and justice in the decades following the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court

decision and the end of legal (*de jure*) segregation. Next, I review evidence indicating that libraries enhance community life.

The subsequent section explores the ideas of social infrastructure and demonstrates three things: First, the documented history of exclusion within social infrastructure in the United States through the 1970s; second, the parallel spaces communities of color created for community life before, during, and since the Jim Crow Era; and third, sparse but growing, work that links the past exclusion to current experience. To conclude this section, I reflect on the identity of those producing the reviewed texts, arguing that white-presenting scholars need to engage in change-focused research.

In the final sections of this chapter, I review two theoretical perspectives that inform my work—one grounded in communication, the other leadership. For the former, I explore co-cultural communication theory and call for its expansion. For the latter, the chapter concludes with an explication of adaptive leadership and complexity to situate how library leaders can make progress within the wicked problem of racial inequity throughout U.S. community life.

Community Life

Community life in the United States is not experienced equitably for reasons largely traceable to the history of racial segregation and invisible systems that promote white superiority and assimilation of the minoritized, beginning in the settler-colonial period. The echoes of this history manifest in the present via the choices available to community members based on their social identities and the decisions that are most rational for them. This means that community members have differing ability to access community assets, including social infrastructure (Alexander, 2020; DeGruy, 2017; Katznelson, 2005; Kendi, 2016; McIntosh, 1988; Mitchell, 2018; Rothstein, 2017).

Systematic, intentional exclusion of the global majority from equal access to social infrastructure, including public swimming pools, transportation, and education, across the United States through both *de jure* and *de facto* segregation (Cheney, 2024; Catsam, 2017; Kirk, 2014; Wells et al., 2008; Wiltse, 2007) was aided by decisions made within the profession of planning, as well as by elected officials who set government agendas. Those actions shape past and present access to social infrastructure assets, including public libraries. Public libraries have been recognized as crucial for self-improvement since their original proliferation (Gregorian, 2019). More recently, research has highlighted the pivotal nature of libraries as space for community life (Klinenberg, 2018), as valuable democratic space (Talisse, 2019; Qian, 2014), and as an identifiable community asset with quantifiable impact on community member wellbeing (Thorne Wallington, 2013; Wolch, et al., 2005; Galster & Santiago, 2006).

Planning, governmentality, and belonging

Professionals in planning and community studies scholars – respectively, government administrators responsible for an array of functions and those who train them – as well as academicians who bring study in history, sociology, or anthropology to bare on analysis of community life – most often write and work from the perspective of the present. In divergent ways, scholars in these disciplines explore both the necessity for social infrastructure and its impact on quality of life for community members. The following review demonstrates that U.S. planning and government policies have prioritized white spaces and the maintenance of relative white affluence.

Planning for Some People

Early planners debated the importance of the physical environment as it relates to both personal and commercial prosperity. Following the view of Fredrick Law Olmstead, Jr., the

dominant ethos among the planning profession from its origins to the present prioritizes economic vitality rather than resident prosperity. Meanwhile, social reform is typically avoided (Cordes, 2019). Community studies was in its "third wave" from the 1920s-50s, intent on exploring social life "to understand each community as a moral order or set of shared ideas and attitudes … despite their fragmentation by neighborhood, class, ethnicity, and race" (Abbott, 1996, p. 693).

The Great Migration to northern cities by mostly Black families before and just after World War II, and the rapid growth of suburbia across the United States by migration of mostly white families in the post-war period through the 1970s, impacted everything from popular culture to public policy as it "rekindled an anti-urban bias and shaped an emerging domestic ideology among middle-class Americans, which stressed the family's moral role in nurturing order amidst urban chaos" (Conzen, 2014, p. 321). Part and parcel of this migration was Urban Renewal, a period of federally funded, inner-core redevelopment and interstate highway expansion from the late 1930s through the 1960s. It was in large part a tool for "slum clearance" to change many urban centers and reinforce residential segregation without reliance on zoning codes (Rothstein, 2017, p. 127). The policies that gave federal money to cities for Interstate development did not mandate displaced residence be compensated for their losses or receive assistance in finding new housing, and the more than 8 in 10 of displaced households by 1962 were non-white (Rothstein, 2017; McGraw, 1963).

Topeka's own urban renewal effort – The Keyway – had uprooted at least 648 families and single residents by 1962 (McGraw, 1963). McGraw (1963) reported about 3,000 residents lived in the 28-block area disrupted by The Keyway, according to a project-related housing report. The report indicated the neighborhood was racially diverse, with white residents and the

combined population of Latino, Black, and Indigenous residents nearly equal (McGraw, 1963). The neighborhood, known locally as The Bottoms (Velasco, et al., 2025) included many homes that lacked indoor plumbing or were otherwise classified as "substandard housing" (McGraw, 1963). In total, 55 percent of the disrupted structures were residential, with at least 198 owner-occupied and at least 249 all-tenant occupied homes (McGraw, 1963). The Keyway area included the address of every Topeka business listed in the 1940 edition of *The Negro Motorist Green-Book* (Green, 1940). McGraw (1963) noted that most residents displaced by The Keyway moved to other areas of substandard housing within the city, creating a "serious problem" (p. 132). As McGraw observed:

> It has always been hoped that through urban renewal these relocatees when placed into a proper environment which includes good housing within a healthy neighborhood would be able to acclimate themselves to the neighborhood and thus upgrade their economic and social standards comparable to those of the healthy neighborhood (1962, p. 132).

In other words, assimilationist goals could not be realized and already densely populated neighborhoods deemed "unhealthy" in other areas of the city got no support in sustaining more, displaced residents.

Policies that Discriminate

Within the structures of governmentality, planners are almost always recommenders, not decision makers. Governmentality, and the utilization of policy tools to advance specific agendas, is a product of power dynamics, location, time, and political temperament (Baum, 2004; Hohle, 2009; Irazabal & Farhat, 2008; Katznelson, 2005). These efforts have long-lingering consequences. Urban renewal is one policy example.

The G.I. Bill serves as another classic example. Adopted in 1944 days after D-Day, the G.I. Bill of Rights was "deliberately designed to accommodate Jim Crow" to appease Southern legislators (Katznelson, 2005, p. 114) through decentralized administration that kept eligibility decisions in the hands of states and localities. "On balance, despite the assistance that [B]lack soldiers received, there was no greater instrument for widening an already huge racial gap in postwar America than the GI Bill" (Katznelson, 2005, p. 121).

Tax increment financing (TIF), a present-day policy tool of economic development incentive intended to support ideas such as infill development, serves as another example. While not necessarily ill-intentioned, as architecture professor Marie-Alice L'Heureux (2015) explored, TIFs are often not utilized with an eye toward repairing past harms. L'Heureux is particularly interested in Kansas City, Missouri, noting how the shadow of urban renewal still looms. She demonstrates that the city's tax increment financing incentives have been underutilized in the most underdeveloped areas, "even though these are exactly where private investment would not occur 'but for' this financial support" (L'Heureux, 2015, p. 252). Residential segregation persists and policy decisions have further disadvantaged minoritized and under-resourced neighborhoods, resulting in limited opportunities to develop and grow areas rich in architecture because they are cut off from the parts of the city more readily considered for redevelopment (L'Heureux, 2015).

A final example of how government policy reflected and reinforced segregated civic life is provided by Randolph Hohle's (2009) retrospective analysis of community policing in the Civil Rights Era. Birmingham and Selma, Alabama, and Albany, Georgia, exemplify three governmental approaches to establishing "normative political culture" of cities through response to demonstration and protest (Hohle, 2009). Cities and counties that clung to the "old South project" opted for "police in riot gear (helmets, gas masks) and visibly displaying weapons (e.g.

guns, cattle prods, dogs, fire hoses and tanks) to intimidate and frighten" (Hohle, 2009, p. 502) as in Birmingham. In contrast, officials in Albany embraced a "new south revitalization project." The principal difference was "allowing for minimal levels of civil rights demonstrations" (Hohle, 2009, p. 498), meeting non-violent demonstrators in standard-issue uniforms with "minimal force" and generic arrests on suspicion of "disorderly conduct and marching without a permit" (Hohle, 2009, p. 502). This tactic was intentional to protect the city's image, and limit media perception of "racial tensions and southern instability" (Hohle, 2009, p. 502), not in recognition of demonstrators as community members with citizenship, agency, and grievance. A similar analysis could be conducted in the present as police policies continue vary by city (Vasilogambros, 2021).

Consequences of 20th Century Planning and Governmentality

A city's culture of generations ago, as described above, is unlikely to persist unchanged into the present. Still, cultural change is slow, and the shadows of history are long. Decisions rooted in anti-urban and anti-poverty bias perpetuate systems that enforce disparate access without ever necessitating a thought of race or the decisions of the past. Documenting the impact of these biases is complicated.

Galster (2008) notes that it is hard to quantify neighborhood effects on residents. Layers of concern range from defining the scale of the neighborhood – challenging because different government entities collect data defined by distinct boundaries (transit route or census tract, for example) – to statical concerns of endogeneity. Despite these challenges, Galster and Santiago (2006) note empirical research "statistically links disadvantaged neighborhood environments with social and economic outcomes of low-income, minority children" (Galster & Santiago, 2006, p. 201). These neighborhood links include six internal factors, among them socialization,

social norms, social networks, and exposure to crime and violence, as well as four external influences: public services, stigmatization, local institutional resources (private and non-profit), and spatial mismatch, which limits "accessibility to job opportunities appropriate to the skills of their residents" (Galster & Santiago, 2006, p. 204). Public services as described include social infrastructure assets. They interviewed 246 parents living in Denver Housing Authority units about how they thought their neighborhood affected their children. Some 2 in 3 perceived negative influences and, for example, did not feel comfortable letting their children play outside or engage with peers in the neighborhood, due to safety and negative peer-influence concerns among others (Galster & Santiago, 2006).

Scholars have considered the systemic impacts of planning decisions in a variety of ways. Irazabal and Farhat (2008), for instance, focus on planning's impact on Latino residents. They traced planning and place-making through pre-World War II, postwar, and the modern area as it relates to Latino communities. They provide this important summary:

> In the prewar city, segregation and commodification, government gerrymandering, and institutionalized discrimination were prevalent barriers Latinos faced. In the postwar city, we need to account for the added effects of suburbanization, the social criminalization of poverty, de-industrialization and failed economic mobility, and the government 'siege' of the barrio through urban renewal and freeway construction. Today, sustained low-skilled immigration, unsatisfactory access to education and jobs, political disempowerment, xenophobic sentiments, and social exclusion remain challenges (2008, p. 221).

Planning for All

In response to this legacy, planners in some communities are shifting priority from maximizing economic gains toward increasing resident prosperity. Doing so often requires active intervention on behalf of marginalized people to create actual equal opportunity in nominally unbiased public spaces and policies. Historically, community development work grew from planning because of government policy and private funding in the 1960s and 70s (Wolf-Powers, 2008). Wolf-Powers (2008) describes a group of "activist planners" galvanized in response to urban renewal's exclusionary consequences. Those planners began to educate and engage citizens in the planning process in Brooklyn during the formation of federal Community Development Corporations. It was those activist planners – in New York and nationally – who "helped build a community development infrastructure that exists (though possessing varying degrees of capacity) in most cities today" (Wolf-Powers, 2008, p. 192). Policies those planners encouraged included urban ecology, rehabilitation and infill development, and the necessity for community engagement within mainstream planning processes (Wolf-Powers, 2008).

More recently, planners for sanctuary cities, for example, are often prioritizing residents by centering social justice and the Right to the City (Lefebvre, 1968; Kuge, 2019). "Inclusionary planning measures such as sanctuary policies" (Cordes, 2019, p. 96), among them municipal IDs, low-cost banking, and the right to not be reported if no felony has been committed, support Lefebvre's notion that the right to the city allows a resident to belong to the city. Positive as are these examples, cuts in federal funding and radical new federal policies may chill these efforts.

Placemaking, a touchstone concept in planning, is just as subject to structural whiteness as are other planning efforts. One example of this in Topeka is an effort to return attention to the history of The Bottoms neighborhood, which was dismantled by urban renewal in the 1950s and

60s. This renewed interest came in the wake of announcements about the federally funded Polk-Quincy Viaduct project (Velasco, et al., 2025; Miller, 2025). That new federal highway project, underway now through 2027, is relocating 2.5 miles of interstate (K-DOT, 2025) built during The Keyway, and has spurred plans for riverfront development and community space under the viaduct (Miller, 2025). While governmental and quasi-governmental entities have sought input through public surveys on how this space should be used in the future, development in the present has led residents and academics to study the history of The Bottoms, and the lives disrupted by the earlier highway project. Whether they realize it, these residents are calling for critical placemaking. As Burns and Berbary (2021) describe, critical placemaking holds that all redevelopment efforts must contemplate both "who and what has been displaced, rejected, lost, or overwritten" in the work of revitalization (Burns & Berbary, 2021, p. 656), if the space itself prioritizes a predominate race, or if it shares power equally (Kendi, 2019a).

Libraries and community life

Libraries play a pivotal role in community life when they are accessible and viewed as a place one wants to be (Klinenberg, 2018; Janse van Vuren & Latsky, 2009). Janse van Vuren and Latsky's (2009) consider how libraries can continue to be destinations of choice – a placemaking goal – in response to increasing digitization. It is necessary, they suggest, to balance services, collection, and place to become, or continue to be, "a destination of choice" (Janse van Vuren & Latsky, 2009, p. 9). As digital resources increase and the repository function of a library is changing, the logical evolution is toward space for collaboration and social activity. "Space as a whole is more than place and its meaning, without a conscious effort, has to move toward becoming a more encompassing whole" (Janse van Vuren & Latsky, 2009, p. 9). They suggest accounting for the needs of local users – including performance reviews of patron-facing staff

and regular assessments of service quality; digitizing more and collaborating with publishers who do so; recognizing that "people using the library as physical space use it for both information and other needs" (Janse van Vuren & Latsky, 2009, p. 8) and balancing that libraries should be both "living room" and provider of prompt information.

Spaces such as these matter to individuals for a variety of reasons. They also contribute to society itself. Talisse (2019, p. 44) considers "spaces like public libraries" among the sites of democracy, along with "parks, street corners, community centers, cafes, pubs, and interactive regions of the Internet" where political dialogue is welcome. Carcasson (2018, p. 39) compels city and organization leaders to "build capacity for deliberative engagement processes designed and proven to help create the collaborative cultures that work against the tide of polarization" to perpetuate democracy itself. The Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library has intentionally been a site for such deliberative work, training its staff and interested community members in deliberative practice facilitation and encouragement of a variety of perspectives within those dialogues. And yet, it must be noted, "[a]ssumedly democratic spaces of unconstrained access and interaction may in fact be crosscut by subtle boundaries pivoting on issues of race, class, and so on" (Qian, 2014, p. 835). Again, perceptions of safety, comfort, and ease in a space impact the ability of persons to show up and to fully participate.

Social infrastructure organizations, such as public libraries, are among the public spaces characterized as community assets by scholars and planners conducting asset mapping and other forms of resource-access audits (Thorne Wallington, 2013; Wolch, et al., 2005). These assets contribute to both quantifiable and perceived equity within communities (Galster & Santiago, 2006; Thorne Wallington, 2013) and neighborhoods nearest these assets are home to more residents who believe they have social capital in their neighborhood (Klinenberg, 2018; Kranich,

2001), better access to services that enrich their daily lives (Aptekar, 2019; Thorne Wallington, 2013), increased sense of belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Leviten-Reid et al., 2020), and positive influences to their overall health and feelings of wellbeing (Bruner, 2010).

Social Infrastructure

Social infrastructure is most simply a network of community assets created by community investment (tax dollars) that make life in that community less burdensome and more enriching. When social infrastructure networks are strong and equitable, they can provide and create access that helps community residents overcome barriers created by systemic disadvantage. Today, too many community residents do not have equitable access to social infrastructure services, which creates disparity in ability to access and engage in community life. This systemic inequity is rooted in the fact that white people originally built these community assets to serve themselves.

Eric Klinenberg defined social infrastructure in *Palaces for the People* (2018, p. 5) as "the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact," and writes that social infrastructure is "crucially important, because local, face-to-face interactions … are the building blocks of all public life." His work, seminal to the concept of social infrastructure, does not address the legacy of systemic inequity within social infrastructure – resulting from decisions made or settled for – by planners, administrators, and elected officials over decades and generations. He also does not address the role of social infrastructure leadership in changing their institutions' cultures, environments, or service networks.

Current research on social infrastructure considers its relationship to community life, access, and equity and is being undertaken by planners, sociologists, geographers, anthropologists, historians, educational policy experts, and librarians working from the fields of

urban studies, planning, educational equity, community studies, leisure studies, and ethnic and cultural studies. This section explores the breadth of this scholarly conversation. First presented here are historical analyses documenting that we live in a system of social infrastructure that disadvantages certain identities. The second conversation is exploring how communities of color have been resilient and diligent about creating often parallel spaces. Third, even when parallel space is vibrant, intentional exclusion and disparate access legally enforced in the past has real consequences in present-day outcomes. Finally, I conclude this section offering analysis of what the scholar brings to scholarship and the role of scholarship in the work of progress.

Historic understanding: Segregated social infrastructure

While research connecting historic exclusion to present engagement is sparse, scholars have in comparison thoroughly examined social infrastructure in the United States during the Jim Crow Era. Book-length investigations of social infrastructure during that time consider airports (Ortlepp, 2017), public swimming pools (Wiltse, 2007), public libraries (Knott, 2015; Wiegand & Wiegand, 2018), and libraries within public schools (Wiegand, 2024). Each of these chronicles activity in southern cities, northern cities, and to varying degrees western cities. Also, well-explored in journal articles are accounts of desegregation processes of interstate transit (Catsam, 2017), swimming pools in specific communities (Kirk, 2014), golf courses in specific communities (Wells et al., 2008), city parks in specific communities (Retzlaff, 2021), urban community parks (Rigolon, 2016; Rigolon et al. 2018), state parks and state park systems (O'Brien, 2012), and public libraries in specific communities (Knott Malone, 2007). A common theme among these analyses is the need for court cases and judicial mandates to compel desegregation, as well as the choice by authors to identify what occurred because of those orders as "desegregation," rather than "integration."

In effort to provide brief historical grounding, it is worth noting that it was not until after the inter-state Freedom Rides that "by November 1, 1961, the Interstate Commerce Commission outlawed segregation in bus terminals and the government followed through on enforcement" (Catsam, 2017, p. 107). The last U.S. airport terminal was desegregated in 1963 (Ortlepp, 2017). Tennessee's parks were desegregated in 1962 by executive order (O'Brien, 2012). In Little Rock (Kirk, 2014), where the all-white public library was gradually opened to Black residents in the late 1940s and early 50s, and buses were desegregated in 1956, access to parks and amenities like the city's zoo began restricted by certain days of the week. Golf courses in Baltimore also used a gradual approach to desegregation, restricting by specific day before removing restrictions on course access (Wells et al., 2008). Baltimore's playgrounds, pools, beaches, and athletic fields were not fully desegregated until after the Brown decision "although discrimination continued to manifest itself in many and varied ways" (Wells et al., 2008, p. 166).

It is clear from this body of work that social infrastructure spaces have a deep history as tax-funded public assets that provided disparate service based on race, and were often sites of indignity, cruelty, and harm for minoritized patrons. Wells and co-authors make two especially important points in their analysis of Baltimore's outdoor recreational spaces. First, they write: "Human agency … must be regarded in relation to larger structural forces that generate uneven distribution of environmental amenities and disamenities" (Wells et al., 2008, p. 167). This is as true today as it was when the city of Baltimore began legally desegregating its recreational spaces in the late 1950s and 1960s. Second, "Just because African Americans had 'access' to a local park or recreational facility does not mean they could take full advantage of all that a given park had to offer" (Wells et al., 2008, p. 153). To be plain: Legal access does not equate to social or psychological access. Even so, few of the scholars interested in bygone policies of exclusion

consider how past segregation might impact present use, nor do they offer actionable examples or recommendations for leaders today.

In an example that highlights the connection to leadership and communication decision-making, Retzlaff (2021) explains: "As late as 1970, however, Montgomery's parks did not contain signs to indicate they were public parks, a decision which some critics viewed as racially motivated" (Ratzlaff, 2021, p. 724). What is communicated is intentional. This example shows an active decision was made to communicate support for social exclusion from legally desegregated public parks.

"Homemade Citizenship" and creating parallel space

A complementary line of scholarship explores the numerous ways communities of color have created spaces for themselves as it relates to literature and communal experience of books and throughout community life inside and outside. This work provides evidence of the crucial importance of spaces for communal life, activity, and engagement that do not require the burden of being an other. Three works are highlighted here to illustrate this point. Each examines networks and spaces created to support community flourishing in response to exclusion. The prioritization of access to books and knowledge in parallel to exclusionary library systems should be understood by everyone in the library profession.

Elizabeth McHenry's (2002) *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the lost history of African American literary societies* is a study of Black literary societies and the reading habits of Black Americans from 1830 to 1940. It draws attention to the "historic invisibility of [B]lack readers, especially in the early nineteenth century" (McHenry, 2002, p. 4). McHenry is an English professor in New York. Throughout the study she illustrates the value placed upon literacy and education within Black communities that experienced "legislated illiteracy before the Civil War"

(McHenry, 2002, p. 6). Census data indicates steadily increasing literacy rates for Black Americans between 1880 and 1910, a 40-percentage-point increase in literacy rates in those 30 years (McHenry, 2002). During the period covered in her analysis, it was common for Black literary societies and women's clubs to maintain lending libraries and provide reading rooms for the Black community. McHenry's (2002) history demonstrates the strong cultural value placed on literacy and self-improvement within the Black community, as well as the role of Black literary societies to encourage and sustain it.

Like McHenry's uplifting of Black readers, Koritha Mitchell (2020) highlights the power of "homemade citizenship" in *From slave cabins to the White House: Homemade citizenship in African American culture*. Mitchell (2020) argues that creating and reclaiming is a pattern that sustains, perpetuates, and supports thriving Black individuals and communities. An English professor and cultural critic in Massachusetts, Mitchell (2020) explicitly connects the need for such resiliency to normative whiteness and its continuing efforts to erase and exclude. Under these conditions, citizenship must "be defined and pursued in ways that call upon an authority beyond the nation-state. Its value does not derive from civic inclusion" (Mitchell, 2020, p. 22). She writes (2020, pp. 22-23):

> So, cultivating homemade citizenship, creating a sense of belonging from scratch (without basic ingredients like safety) is a way of making mainstream recognition less important because the nation's withholding of recognition is simply another example of know-your-place aggression anyway.

Such "know-your-place aggression" happens in myriad ways, including as Chhaya Kolavalli (2023) describes in her book about urban food policymaking for Kansas City BIPOC neighborhoods. In *Well-Intentioned Whiteness: Green urban development and Black resistance*

in Kansas City, Kolavalli (2023) offers a cautionary tale of what happens when neighbors are not engaged as stakeholders in policy decisions that change their neighborhood. Kansas City's history of redlining, blockbusting, urban renewal, and revitalization all disrupted Black communities, families, and businesses. Now, as Kolavalli (2023) describes, a proliferation of urban food projects is happening *to* rather than *with* those neighborhoods, and residents are compelled to create parallel systems to support their needs. For example, the local farm-to-table food economy is growing in ways that preference white farmers, which Kolavalli describes in detail. She summarizes (Kolavalli, 2023, p. 147):

> While Black farmers face systemic, institutionalized, and interpersonal racism in Kansas City's local food economy that make scaling up their farm businesses difficult, they are often selling in expansive networks that are unrecognizable in hegemonic discourse painting the urban core as a food desert. … In innovative ways – even as they have been excluded from formal sales networks – Black entrepreneurs have flourished in the local food economy.

These three works illustrate a phenomenon within our social reality of which social infrastructure leaders must be aware. Parallel systems are necessary when the normative system fails to support community flourishing. Decision-making that does not recognize and incorporate global majority community members as sources of knowledge entrenches normative structures rather than advances solutions. Municipalities that want to enhance livability must prioritize disrupting and evolving beyond normative whiteness within social infrastructure and throughout the city's administrative structures as part of their governmentality ethos.

Connecting past to current

Though limited, the third conversation I highlight is the one that aims to link historic exclusion from social infrastructure to outcomes in the present. Allen (2017) documents the creation and perpetuation of transit deserts in her planning text, *Lost in the transit desert: Race, transit access, and suburban form*. Others investigate the history of outdoor amenity access, including public parks and pools, and disparate outcomes in the present. Two authors in leisure studies doing this work are James Edward Mills, an outdoor journalist writing for a general audience, and Jeff Wiltse, a historian and professor based in Montana. An environmental justice scholar, Carolyn Finney, joins them in an effort to follow an unbroken thread of the past into the present. Finney, a geographer and professor of environmental studies in California, bridges cultural studies and history to examine how legacies of the past influence and determine who gets to be outside and in the wilderness.

Like Mitchell (2020) and Galster and Santiago (2006), Finney (2014) highlights the crucial importance of safety as part of a BIPOC individual's calculus related to entering a space built on structural whiteness. Finney's (2014) *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* weaves interview and collective memory with research exploring pop culture, environmental politics, environmental advocacy organization structure, racism, and diversity as it relates to experiences of being outside, in wilderness or within the city. Extensive interviews illuminate of how dominant cultural representations of Black communities have combined with historic legacies of exclusion and the real risk of physical harm for Black Americans at the hands of government agents and others, discouraging their *being* outside.

Avoiding direct physical or psychological harm, thus prioritizing safety and survival, is always top of mind, she writes: "Whether drawing on ancestral memory, historical 'fact,' or simply 'driving while black' in today's world, this knowledge forms an integral part of [B]lack people's inner GPS and how they navigate white spaces" (Finney, 2014, p. 118). When outdoors, interviewees felt fear and mistrust because of "what these spaces represent in the eyes of a [B]lack person hobbled by repressive rules, cultural norms, racist propaganda, and the possibility of death" (Finney, 2014, p. 117).

Challenging the cultural norms, rules, and propaganda that Finney uncovers are among the stated reason Mills (2014), an outdoor journalist, wrote *The Adventure Gap: Changing the face of the outdoors*. The book chronicles the first all-Black climbing expedition of Denali, North America's highest summit. The racial violence of the 1960s may be behind us, he writes, "But what remains are … the unwritten set of expectations … for what people of a certain racial or ethnic background are supposed to do as part of 'normal behavior.' For many… these expectations do not include embracing the outdoors" (2014, p. 57).

In addition to the adventure story of that 2013 Denali expedition, Mills (2014) profiles Black outdoor trailblazers to encourage Black youth to see themselves represented in the outdoors, seeking to decrease what he calls "the Adventure Gap" (p. 57). While Black Americans represent about 13 percent of the total population, they represent 5-6 percent of National Park visitors. Participation disparity is similar among the ranks of professional outdoor sport athletes (rock-climbing, mountain biking, kayaking, and downhill skinning among them) and among the senior leadership of companies involved in the multibillion-dollar outdoor industry (Mills, 2014).

Historian Wiltse (2014) also connects to outdoor safety and the impact of stereotypes and cultural norms and expectations. His book-length social history of swimming pools (2007) details racial tensions at both northern and southern public pools and the suburban location of nearly all competitive swim clubs. Using data from organizations with national scope such as U.S.A. Swimming, Wiltse (2014) compiles receipts linking the past to current water-focused health outcomes: "Black children are half as likely to know how to swim as white children and 3 times more likely to drown" (p. 367). He directly addresses the stereotype that Black people *cannot* swim as created by proponents of segregation to hinder them from learning, and thereby from participating in public pool recreation. Further: "… past discrimination in the provision of and access to swimming pools is largely responsible for the current swimming disparity and thus indirectly responsible, at least in part, for the current drowning disparity" (Wiltse, 2014, p. 368).

Each of these scholars is focused on improving outcomes – for access and ability to engage in outdoor spaces and sport; for swimming skill acquisition; and for the including of BIPOC individuals within the ranks of environmental advocates at greater numbers. To that end, Finney (2014) offers recommendations for meaningful change within environmental organizations. An honest reckoning and dismantling of racism within the organizations is required, she writes, as well as development of "a healthy sense of respect for the culture, identity, leadership, and agendas of African American communities" (Finney, 2014, p. 114). These are recommendations to which social infrastructure leaders also would be wise to heed.

Guess who?

The distinct nature of these three scholarly conversations is telling. Plainly, scholars of differing social identities, in particular race presentation, are investigating different things related to participation in community, access to community, and the sense of safety required to engage.

My analysis of relevant literature shows that white-presenting scholars are primarily interested in what happened in the past in normative white space – without explicitly recognizing it as white space. Black, Indigenous, and other scholars of color are studying how communities persevered in the face of exclusion, creating parallel assets out of necessity. And a small and diverse group of scholars, including one white-presenting scholar, has actively investigated causal connections between past overt exclusion and current disparities in mortality due to drowning.

The broad collection of historical reviews presented here documents how legalized segregation and behavioral convention impacted social infrastructure through the 1970s. These are presented as histories based on record and are largely the work of white-presenting scholars. While many of the historical reviews noted here include policy analysis within social history, there is little to no call to consider the impact of that history on the current atmosphere of that social infrastructure asset. This scholarship meets the ever-necessary task of preserving the past. And yet, with two exceptions (Ratzlaff, 2021; Wells et al., 2008) these works do not seek to learn how the past impacts today's reality nor offer recommendations for leaders to ensure that past is not repeated. Time has marched more than 70 years since the *Brown* decision and more than 60 years since passage of the Civil Rights Act. White-presenting scholars of the 21st Century have an obligation – ethically and morally – to move beyond *look what happened* conversations. While I recognize not every scholar has an action orientation (Crotty, 1998; Johnson, 2017; Post, et al., 2016), the polarization of current society and the echo-chambers of the digital world create a landscape in which all research can be viewed as critical research. As such, scholarship requires an iterative "process … of reflection and action" (Crotty, 1998, p. 157). Thus, it is not enough to say what happened. Scholars of the social sciences should take

more “solution-oriented” approach focused on social challenges, rather than continued focus on theory advancement (Watts, 2017).

The second group of works, documenting parallel assets before, during, and since the Jim Crow era, is the work of scholars of color. Some of these scholars focus explicitly on how this pattern of creation will continue to support and sustain minoritized communities in the future. Others document previously ignored history in focus on resilience.

Third, so far limited to transit, leisure studies, and environmental justice, is work that explores links between historic lack of access to swimming pools and outdoor sport to today’s swimming skill disparity, drowning rate disparity, and disparity in outdoor sport engagement, outdoor leisure, and play. This diverse group of scholars call for addressing these gaps through action in policy, civic investment, and social practice. Only scholars of color (Finney, 2014; Mitchell, 2020) specifically address the ever-present concern for safety that burdens marginalized community members. Wiltse (2014), the white-presenting scholar who connected public pool access to drowning disparity, did not focus on the prevalent concern for safety in the basic needs sense, but convincingly demonstrates lack of access to swimming social infrastructure created skill gaps that result in more unsafe experiences for Black community members. The scholarly work of making connections between historical exclusion and current disparity is taxing to the physical and emotional wellbeing (Kendi, 2019b). It is immoral, unethical, and inhumane to leave that work to those already unfairly and unnecessarily burdened. In this, I join the call of other scholars that what constitutes responsible scholarship must evolve to be more solution-oriented (Tickner, 2006; Watts, 2017).

Moving forward with purpose

This literature review has demonstrated the necessity of social infrastructure to life in a city, as well as the ways governmentality and planning have created multi-generational patterns that influence community members' ability and willingness to access social infrastructure. Lastly, the preceding sections offer lessons from future-minded and improvement-focused scholarship that community asset stewards would be wise to consider. The next sections of this chapter explain the need to add lenses of leadership studies and communication studies to the convergence of Libraryland and the research conversations surrounding social infrastructure. Co-cultural communication theory and adaptive leadership theory offer much opportunity for library leaders. Why social infrastructure, communication, and leadership? Consider how governmental and quasi-governmental decision-making (leadership) – from which neighborhood will get a new public pool, to whether late fees are charged for overdue library materials – sends messages (communication), and contributes to "the facilitation of civil society," as Barber calls it (1999, p. 25). One way such facilitation can occur, says Barber, is through "enlargement and reinforcement of public spaces" (1999, p. 26).

Co-Cultural Communication

The previous section explored social infrastructure amidst the fraught historical U.S. context that has placed invisible but ever-present burdens on minoritized community residents. But full appreciation for how past exclusions continue to influence the most fundamental civic experiences of persons of color requires a theoretical link between culture, symbolic messages, and lived experience. Co-cultural communication theory provides this link. It is a useful lens for understanding how messages sent and received within social infrastructure spaces condition the accessibility of these services.

In addition to the academic literature of co-cultural communication, I weave into the following review the reflections of musician and activist Andre Henry. In *All the white friends I couldn't keep: Hope and hard pills to swallow about fighting for Black lives*, Henry (2022) presents the consequences of his efforts to converse with white friends and family who would not hear and accept his experience of life in America. Henry's ideas are relevant to the study of the impacts of racism on daily life in the United States, especially those concerning inter-racial communication.

Developed by Mark Orbe in the late 1990s, co-cultural communication theory extends and blends muted group theory and standpoint theory in recognition that "although these co-cultures exist all around us, their experiences are often made invisible by the pervasiveness of the dominant culture" (Orbe, 1998, p. 1). "Co-cultural" is chosen as the descriptor because it does not preference dominant culture (Orbe, 1996). Orbe (1996, p. 2) explains the term thusly:

> Because an assortment of co-cultures simultaneously exists in our society, co-cultural communication theory also is grounded in the notion that over time one co-culture (that of European-American heterosexual middle- or upper-class males) has acquired dominant group status in the major societal institutions (i.e., political, corporate, religious, and legal institutions) across the land. This central position of one dominant co-cultural group has rendered other co-cultural groups as marginalized with the predominant societal structures; this does not mean, however, that other co-cultural groups' functioning in other venues are less than effective.

Additionally, co-cultural communication theory recognizes minoritized individuals "must somehow operate within the constraints imposed by their self-concepts, intentions, and an

awareness of dominant group expectations" (Orbe, 1998, p. 31). Or, as Henry (2022, p. 98) writes: "In this climate, nonwhite people often end up thinking of white people as default humans. And when we do, whiteness becomes the standard we strive toward."

Co-cultural communication theory explores why nondominant group members are often stifled in interethnic communication, positing that it is "because many group communication systems and norms reflect prevailing styles and experiences of culturally dominant members" (Abdel-Monem et al., 2010, p. 747). This may lead to codeswitching, self-censorship, or avoidance activities (Orbe, 1998). Therefore, co-cultural communication theory also aids in the study of community member experiences as patrons of social infrastructure organizations for two additional reasons. First, as Kolavalli (2024), Mitchell (2018; 2020), and Henry (2022) explain, dominant culture communication practice is presumed as both expected and consequential in some way – unless intentionally communicated as not so. Second, co-cultural communication theory provides a framework for analyzing messages sent by someone from the dominant culture and messages received by those of a nondominant culture, and conversely. Thus, co-cultural communication invites exploration of how global majority patrons receive messages sent from social infrastructure organization leaders aimed at engaging "the community" at large.

An environment that promotes feelings of safety, comfort, and ease is one that challenges oppression (Adams et al., 2016). It is not one that would require "subordinate communication strategies" (Orbe, 1998, p. 31) such as tomming, passing, shucking, dissembling, or other forms of performance. Each of these requires extra mental and emotional labor and represents a response deemed necessary after internal consideration of the circumstances. As Orbe (1998) describes, the preferred outcome of a communicative exchange is a primary influence in co-cultural communication orientation. Those seeking an outcome of accommodation utilize

different behaviors than those seeking an outcome of assimilation. These tactics have been studied, as example, in response to discriminatory acts (Camara & Orbe, 2010).

For example, co-cultural theory explains that the predominance of racially coded language in the United States is a consequence of society's assimilationist goals. Therefore, leaders of organizations that intend to serve "everybody" must intentionally seek accommodation if they wish to create spaces and services equally open to all. Bennett and Walker (2018) demonstrate this in an analysis of how language and images create a racial code in the U.S. political environment that is employed in key political debates. They conclude, "Politicians intentionally activate the latent racial biases of both racial conservatives and center-left liberals without explicitly talking about race. … Part of its [language's] power comes from its unconscious aspects" (Bennett & Walker, 2018, p. 689). We see this in real time as language of national politics has made "DEI" a euphemism for a racial slur (Hasan, 2025; McDuffie, 2024; Rahman, 2024; Ware, 2025).

Moreover, speaking of the importance of inclusion of diverse populations without working to reduce the structural oppression that makes necessary an explicit call for inclusion is encouraging assimilation (O'Leary, 2013). To encourage meaningful participation from all community residents, it is necessary to see and appreciate beyond normative/structural whiteness – to have all cultures reflected, respected, and honored – in the spaces and places meant to serve all. O'Leary (2013) speaks to this ethos as aligned with accommodationist action, which requires power-sharing, policy prioritization, and changes in broader community life. For Henry (2022), such action is not about accommodating; it is about repairing what he sees as a "fatal flaw of many predominantly white institutions" (p. 196). He describes that flaw this way: "[T]hey prioritize racial diversity over racial equity. White institutions are often far more interested in

appearing nonracist than in sharing real institutional power or intentionally considering, much less serving, Black people's interests" (Henry, 2022, pp. 196-197).

Such efforts to accommodate, not assimilate, BIPOC patrons, have been envisioned if not realized in public libraries. For example, Cooke and co-authors (2016) advocate increasing cultural competence and social justice frameworks within the Library Information Sciences (LIS) curriculum "as both a subject and tool for discussing diversity, equality, racism, power, and privilege in LIS education" (Cooke et al., 2016, p. 109). Whether librarian preparation programs include critical analysis of structural whiteness, leaders in social infrastructure organizations are responsible for the work of combatting racism (Guerin, 2005), taking actions that challenge structures of privilege and oppression to create and sustain environments centering equity and feelings of ease.

Co-Cultural communication and leadership responsibility for accommodation

As a society, we know too much about the harm inflicted by assimilation – against groups minoritized by race, gender, sexual orientation, ability status, age, and religion – to continue to promote it. Thus, social infrastructure leaders have an obligation to work toward the undoing of invisible systems that expect and reward it. Co-cultural communication is a theory that supports that awareness and the collaborative tasks of undoing and rebuilding. The more intentional leadership decisions move to create an environment that allows for safety, comfort, and ease of all patrons, the more barriers to participation are mitigated for them. Simultaneously, gaps in access and opportunity are ameliorated because of direct challenge to normative whiteness in favor of reflecting, respecting, and honoring all cultures within the community.

Creating such ease is necessary because while race is a social construct, its impact on the daily lives of individuals across the world is material and palpable. Also undeniable are the

legacies of oppression within public-serving systems in the United States. The systemic legacies of oppression created a generations-deep historical tension, and, I argue, unfairly puts the burden to overcome that legacy on minoritized community members. Because feeling able to access precedes actual physical access, the cultural norms and expectations perpetuating mistrust and fear contribute to disparities seen today (Adams et al., 2016; Anderson & Domosh, 2002; Desmond, 2016; Finney, 2014; Gusa, 2010; Kendi, 2016; Kendi, 2019a; Klinenberg, 2018; Mitchell, 2020; Oluo, 2019; Rothstein, 2017).

It is also possible for leaders to make progress toward this end through messaging and actions. Leaders who choose to take responsibility for the environment of the organization they steward can benefit from awareness of co-cultural communication and its consideration of messages sent and received. An environment of safety, comfort, and ease is distinct from related constructs such as the Psychological Sense of Community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Lardier et al., 2020) and necessary because of its unique contribution, namely, recognizing the work of the organization itself in critical resistance to normative societal expectations. Social infrastructure leaders have unique responsibilities because their organizations claim to be for everyone and are primarily supported by common community tax resources.

In their seminal work on belonging, Baumeister and Leary (1995) found empirical support for the notion that there is a primary human motivation "for frequent, nonaversive interactions within an ongoing relational bond" (p. 497). Feelings of safety, ease, and comfort are necessary because belonging is predicated on interactions one chooses and maintains over time and because belonging uncertainty can be exacerbated by historical and societal contexts (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Cohen, 2022). This discourse and activity view empowers and obligates social infrastructure leaders to create an environment of sustainable and nonaversive interactions.

Such activity must include power sharing with minoritized patrons. Arnstein (1969) explains that engagement without power-sharing is tokenism. Because of the importance of relationality when people choose to invest time, energy, and other resources, power-sharing to support nonaversive interactions seems a logical next step with implications for overall community vibrancy, as more residents have more positive experiences in cities and towns they call home. As a practical example, encouraging activity and discourse in support of ease, safety, and comfort does not ask for separate spaces for culturally specific literature, as was the goal when spaces for children were first developed in the early 20th century (Kimball, 2014). Instead, work toward creating this environment asks social infrastructure organizations to allow patrons to feel at home.

Adaptive Leadership

Thanks to the structural reality of social infrastructure in the United States and the resulting inequities in accessing these community assets and aided with an appreciation that social groups can support or undermine common ground through language and actions, let us explore how adaptive leadership theory and its partner, complexity, can be a tool for social infrastructure organization leaders committed to progress.

Adaptive leadership asks scholars and practitioners to consider how to make progress on challenges with no clear answers. “Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 14). Heifetz’s early work on adaptive leadership also articulated the special challenges wrought by systems. Systems bias explores how systems create symptoms (Heifetz, 1994). He gives the example that mass protest in response to a judicial decision is not only protest of the decision but of “injustice writ large – the festering issues of unemployment, poverty, inequity, and prejudice” (Heifetz, 1994, p. 3). In the case of

social infrastructure, the symptoms occur because the original designers of U.S. social infrastructure were those the social system intended to serve at that time – not the entire population. The history and legacy of exclusion within the system is a symptom of those design choices. Creating meaningful change requires both systemic and cultural shifts.

Complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017) grew from the study of systems bias and considers leadership within complex adaptive systems (CAS). Uhl-Bien and co-authors (2007) describe CAS as a unit of analysis within complexity science that describes "… changeable structures with multiple, overlapping hierarchies, and like the individuals that comprise them, CAS are linked with one another in a dynamic, interactive network" (p. 299). Collective leadership (Ospina, 2016) relies on complex adaptive systems and adaptive work and is well connected in research to public organization leaders. Ospina and Crosby (2024) in a recent conference session addressed the link between adaptive leadership and complexity. Considering adaptive leadership, complexity leadership, and collective leadership in concert supports understanding the many layers at work when considering history and legacy impacts of harm, firsthand experiences of individual patrons and staff members, and the responsibilities of social infrastructure organizations.

Leading meaningful change requires adaptive rather than technical thinking and actions and is most effective when sharing both power and effort with community members. Executives of all types of organizations who can grow their adaptive leadership capacity, and their understanding of complex adaptive systems enable them to make decisions that can improve effectiveness. Adaptive leadership has been studied as it relates to businesses and marketing (Ayodeji-Ogundiran et al., 2021; Ikonne, 2021), medical settings and the health care industry (Goniewicz & Hertelendy, 2023; Snebold, 2015; Corazzini, et al., 2015), all levels of education

(Cooney et al., 2023; Gildersleeve-Hernandez, 2024; Stephenson, 2011), and government (Aron Said & Castillo Jara, 2022).

For libraries and other social infrastructure organizations, adaptive leadership has myriad applications. Wong and Chan (2018) consider the many ways adaptive leadership may be useful for academic libraries as the organizations adapt to increasingly digital offerings, changing campus environments, and shifting student expectations. They note examples of library management research that describe adaptive leadership, work, and challenges "without the awareness of the adaptive leadership approach" (2018, p. 109). As a result, Wong and Chan (2018) define adaptive leadership for the library management audience, including key elements of adaptive leadership activity and tips for growing adaptive cultures among staff of academic libraries. Outside of the university setting, opportunities abound for using the adaptive leadership approach to address the challenges of the day facing libraries. In today's climate, libraries and librarians face increased scrutiny of their work, the books they provide access to or not, and even how they choose to engage the community through programming (Jones, 2024; Lotta et al., 2024; Mehra & Jaber, 2023; Mipro, 2023). This makes being a librarian in and of itself an adaptive challenge (Jones, 2024).

Adaptive leadership is certainly not the only leadership theory or framework relevant to making progress toward addressing the historical context and current challenges faced by public libraries and their leaders. Adaptive leadership is, however, among the leadership theories that are most accessible to practitioners. Also, it is action focused. After brief introduction to its concepts and tactics even entry level employees, as evidenced by success of undergraduate students in adaptive action projects, can quickly move from theory to practice in meaningful

work. This makes it an ideal way for library leaders to chart steps forward for their staff engaged in shifting the library experience for patrons.

In practical terms, adaptive leadership is a way to think about making progress through leadership activity. Adaptive leadership's commitment to engaging stakeholders such as library patrons provides a crucial opportunity for library leaders, especially in the context of working to address what can be perceived as lack of representation, safety, or ease in an environment that models normative/structural whiteness and often includes security guards or uniformed police presence (Balzer, 2020). Further, its commitments to sharing the work, engaging unusual voices, perspective taking, speaking to loss, ensuring transparency of process, acting experimentally, and holding to shared purpose all are relevant, and necessary if social infrastructure leaders seek an approach that consciously navigates much that is often deeply personal (O'Malley & Cebula, 2015). Adaptive leadership also recognizes that commitment to meaningful progress requires action.

Library Engaged Research for Action on Access

This review sketches the cultural and scholarly terrain in which this study is grounded. Equity and access in a society built upon structural inequality and normative whiteness require careful consideration by organization leaders. That is particularly true of organizations such as public libraries, where the deep-seated belief that libraries are for everyone is often held in high regard among staff, but not necessarily reflected in the experience of patrons universally. Katherine McKittrick (2011), a professor of both Black studies and gender studies in Canada, argues sense of place and history should always be considered together, especially when that history includes raced-based violence that "shape, but do not wholly define" one's worldview (McKittrick, 2011, p. 947). This work endeavors to heed her advice. The next chapter details the

methods of the study, as well as the metatheoretical and ethical underpinnings of design choices focused on amplifying the experiences of community members.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

> "… Then it was that books began to happen to me, and I began to believe in nothing but books and the wonderful world in books …"
>
> ~ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*.
> Hughes attended first grade in Topeka before moving to Lawrence, Kansas, and then Ohio (Ripley & Richmond, 1970). Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library has a large meeting room named in his honor.

As Hughes reflected, even at an early age, books – and libraries – do things to and for people. Are those things happening equitably? This community-engaged, qualitative study investigated a knowledge gap through participant experience narratives and opinions with the goal of aiding library leaders in their daily challenge of meeting community-member needs more directly and completely. Specifically, my research questions were:

1. Why do residents choose to engage or not with their local public library?
2. In what ways do historical legacies of exclusion impact these choices?

The previous chapters situated this scholarly endeavor within both the specific context of Topeka, Kansas, and national conversations regarding race and community life, equity in social infrastructure, co-cultural communication, and adaptive leadership.

Building on this foundation, chapter three describes the study's research design and execution. I begin this chapter demonstrating the value of the community-engaged, qualitative methods of this study. Next, I justify the research-design decisions made to ensure alignment of my questions and purpose with my theoretical and methodological frameworks and methods. Then, I provide relevant description for each of four community research sites, including how these sites currently partner with the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library, as well as details of the interview participant recruitment process at each location. Extensive discussion follows about how I collected participant responses and observations during group interviews

and how this information was analyzed. Penultimately, I explain my positionality, including how I locate myself within this study. Finally, I describe efforts to protect participant identity and preserve confidentiality and how I worked to ensure rigor and trustworthiness. Table 3.1 provides the research process timeline.

Table 3.1. Research tasks and timeline

Tasks by phase	Timeframe
Obtain IRB Approval	Approved October 2024
Recruitment of interview participants - Site partner communication with library leadership - Begin recruitment with site partners & library - Coordinate meals for interview sessions - Reschedule and reorganize because of Winter Storm Blair	Oct. 2024 - Feb. 2025
Group interviews / Data collection - Secure informed consent and voluntary biographical information - Conduct group interview sessions and record observational notes - Ensure recordings are protected and preserved	Dec. 2024 - Feb. 2025
Data analysis / Coding process - Download Zoom transcripts - Review and revise transcripts for accuracy against each recording and written notes - Open coding: Manually review transcripts to identify similarities and connections between/among stories - Focused coding: Manually analyze transcripts and observational notes for understanding of participant stories. - Thematic analysis: Manually analyze transcripts and observational notes to identify prevailing themes.	Jan. - April 2025
Partner feedback & member checking - Communication with library leadership – debrief after interview sessions - Participant follow-up communication as requested	Dec. 2024 - April 2025

Community-Engaged Research

In addition to its scholarly contributions, this study intended to aid library leaders in the challenge of meeting community-member needs more directly and completely. As such, this community-engaged qualitative study aligns with the collaborate level on the Kansas State University Continuum of Engaged Scholarship (KSU Office of Engagement, 2024) and sought to be collaborative, critical, and transformative (Johnson, 2017). To the extent possible, I conducted the research in alignment with the goals of both participatory research (Hall, 1992) and community engagement (Hoyt, 2013). As called for by Hall (1992), the group interview approach "attempted to put the less powerful at the center of the knowledge creation process" (p. 15). As community engaged research, this study's design also recognizes that "the knowledge necessary for transforming cities is, in large part, born and developed in neighborhoods" (Hoyt, 2013, p. 2).

Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library leadership collaborated with me on identifying its partner organizations that would best fit the project's goals, reviewing and refining research questions, and providing feedback on the interview questions. The library director engaged with the directors of organizations that have long partnered with the library, asking them to serve as hosts of group interviews and warmly introducing me and my research endeavor. In all but one case, those directors were previously known to me through community activity, but the endorsement of the library was primary to the organizations' decisions to invest staff time and energy in coordination of the process. The library also supported recruitment of participants for group interviews by providing either box lunches from the library's in-house café or locally sourced donuts, depending on the time of the meeting. Library staff did not have the

capacity to serve as co-researchers in this effort. Therefore, interviews and data analysis reflect my work alone.

It was meaningful to the library leaders to engage in and support this collaboration because the library's new strategic plan identifies among its goals a future co-location or creation of a library branch. Before undertaking such an investment, the library leaders are eager to learn more about community member needs and expectations. This fits with my research agenda goals of understanding how word and deed can increase access, equity, and feelings of ease, comfort, and safety within social infrastructure.

This study considered participating community members as knowledge creators (Post et al., 2016). Even so, it is worth noting that the individual interview participants were collaborators not directly but by affiliation. Put differently, each participant was a patron of an organization that was identified by the library as a partner. Each interviewee responded to a call for participation in the group interview at the organization location. Thus, I collaborated most closely with the library on development of the research, not with the individual interviewees.

Research Design

The following section delineates the study's design.

Qualitative research and epistemology

My interest in the specific experiences of community members meant qualitative methods were the best fit for this research (Bhattacharya, 2017). My questions arise from a critical constructivist epistemology, which recognizes that each research participant has a unique life experience that has been, is, and will continue to be influenced by their interactions and perceptions as well as complex power dynamics, social factors, and systems beyond their personal control (Bettencourt, 2012; Crotty, 1998; Kincheloe, 2005). The constructivists' focus

on individual understanding prioritizes consideration of difference within a group of library patrons. This constructivist understanding made individual storytelling crucial. Therefore, qualitative data in the form of interview transcripts documenting personal narratives, as well as observational field notes and email communication with organization partners, were analyzed and interpreted to understand both personal experience and personal understandings (Crotty, 1998; Smith, 1999). It is essential to honor individuals' experiences and illuminate deep understanding of those experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017; Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022). The power of narratology to make both sense and meaning is universally recognized and utilized across human cultures (Kamya, 2012).

Bridging with participatory research and episodic narrative interview

Before soliciting lived-experience narratives through group interview, I worked to align my interview questions to the most appropriate lens and methods. One could argue that critical race theory and its counter-narrative methods would have been appropriate for my questions (D.A. Bell, 1992; Milner & Howard, 2013). There are two reasons I did not adopt this framework. First and most crucially, the community-engaged process developed with the library meant I did not know who would choose to participate in the partner-hosted group interviews. While the partners involved suggested that a variety of intersectional identities among participants would be likely (Crenshaw, 1991), I could not make assumptions about participants' identities or what experiences they would choose to share in a group setting. Second, I was unable to identify a "stock story" (L.A. Bell, 2019) that went deeper than the idealized slogan "libraries are for everyone."

Critical constructivists hold that "all knowers are historical and social subjects. We all come from a 'somewhere,' which is located in a particular historical time frame" (Kincheloe,

2005, p. 2). This epistemology closely aligns with the ethos of participatory research, as do narrative methods such as storytelling (Hall, 1992). Thus, interviews allowed study participants to speak for themselves through storytelling (Hall, 1992; Smith, 1999; Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022; Wilson, 2008). The interviews utilized both episodic narrative (Mueller, 2019) and semi-structured approaches (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Episodic narrative interview promotes investigation of phenomena and solicits focused narratives through the phrasing of interview questions (Mueller, 2019). This model was used at the beginning of each interview, with the target being the library as place (IFLA-UNESCO, 2022; Norberg-Schulz, 2012; Prizeman, 2012). Mueller (2019) describes episodic narrative interview as a critically oriented methods fusion that borrows from narrative inquiry, semi-structured interview, and episodic interview. The approach offers an alternative to methods "designed to generate *big* stories" (Mueller, 2019, p. 2, emphasis original). Further, it provides a lens of analysis aimed at the phenomena experienced, rather than how the participant tells a story (Mueller, 2019).

Following Mueller's summary of steps, the phenomenon of interest established for my interviews was the experience of the library. The first episode I sought to explore was the participants' earliest memory of visiting a library. The story about the phenomenon of the library as place that followed – the "second story" as Mueller terms it – was exploring what occurred during their most recent visit to the library. The second pairing of episodic narrative elicitation included in my interview protocol explored what participants recalled about their family of origin's library related habits, with the second story exploring how that is similar or different from their own current library habits.

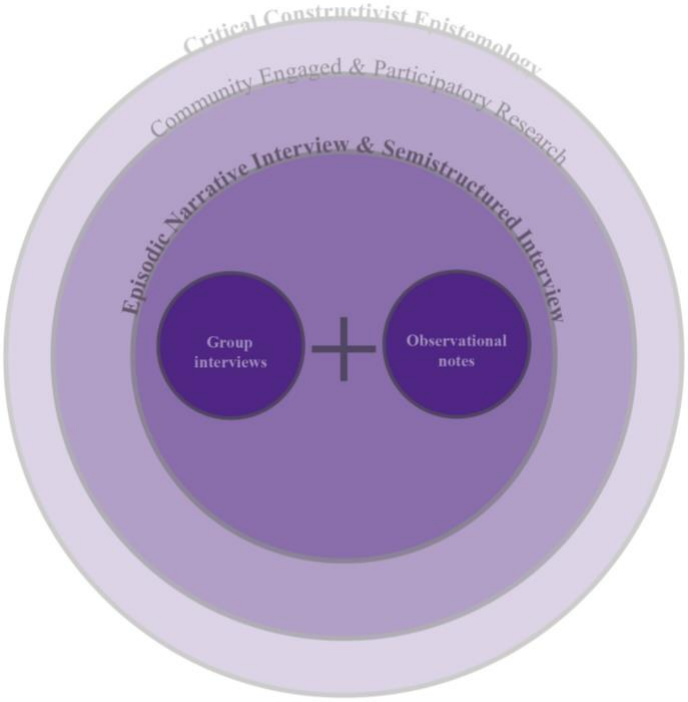
Following those question pairs, the remainder of my interview protocol focused less on eliciting narrative response. Subsequent questions sought the participants' level of knowledge about the library and their opinions about and aspirations for a public library that they would use more often, or as an asset closer to their home. Some participants responded to these questions with narratives, but not universally. My semi-structured interview questions were open-ended, and throughout the interviews across all four locations I followed the written guide as a protocol with probes as needed (Bhattacharya, 2017; see Appendix C).

Asking participants to share stories of their experiences and to explain what they want from the library allowed me to elicit information relevant to both research audiences: organization leaders and scholars. The research purpose centered on investigation of both the lived experiences of individual community members and the symptoms wrought by the legacy of exclusion from the library and other social infrastructure. Most immediately, library leaders need information about the ideal library in the mind of participants. But gaps in scholarly knowledge also required episodic narrative instigation that allowed participants to share memories and present-day activity patterns.

Each group interview included participants from many cultural backgrounds. Therefore, assuming one meaning among all participants for a particular word or phrase, as in narrative analysis, would have been disingenuous. Instead, qualitative analysis of the participants' responses allowed the participants speak for themselves. In addition to group interview transcripts, I took observational field notes during each interview to capture paralanguage (see Figure 3.1). I follow Martin and Zappavinga's (2019) definition of paralanguage as meaning-making "dependent on language and realized through both sound quality and body language (including facial expression, gesture, posture, and movement)" (p. 3). While deep paralanguage

analysis requires video, I was able to note in real time general changes in body composure and posture, facial expression, and if gesturing occurred. The audio recordings captured changes in a respondent's voice pitch, intonation, and inflection. A rich body of literature surrounding paralanguage indicates such expressions embody meaning (Martin & Zappavinga, 2019).

Figure 3.1. Research Visualization



As mentioned, each study participant is a patron of an organization with which the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library has a longstanding partnership. By conducting group interviews hosted by those partner organizations, I attempted to ensure both ease and comfort of participants. I prioritized ease of access by ensuring participants would be familiar with the location and be able to get there easily. Comfort was prioritized by ensuring participants would likely have familiarity with at least some of the other participants and because of the provided

light meal. Throughout each interview, I utilized a consecutive turn-taking structure rather than free-for-all speaking to ensure each participant would know they had "the right to speak" (Hall, 1992, p. 22). In-depth, open-ended questions facilitated exploration and deep, reflexive understanding, and I sought rich description, eliciting storytelling about specific experiences and explanations of why the experiences were perceived as they were. Thus, I honored the observation that "each individual story is powerful" (Smith, 1999, p. 144). Additionally, interviews supported both exploration and verification when the stories shared overlapped (Gubrium, et al., 2012).

Theories of adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1998; Heifetz et al., 2009), co-cultural communication (Orbe, 1998), and the operation of structural/normative whiteness within planning and social infrastructure as they apply to library access informed the semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C). Questions allowed for exploration of the multiple demands facing library decision-makers, including increasing library utilization and understanding what factors may compel visits to the library. The questions also recognized that culturally rooted communication styles may create gaps between community members and a social infrastructure organization. Lastly, in the questions I sought to explore how an imagined library space can challenge normative whiteness to increase feelings of ease among minoritized community members.

Recruitment and Participants

Recruitment of both participating library partners as research hosts and their patrons as participants was purposeful. The following section illuminates this process and introduces the organizations and interviewees.

Library as site recruiter

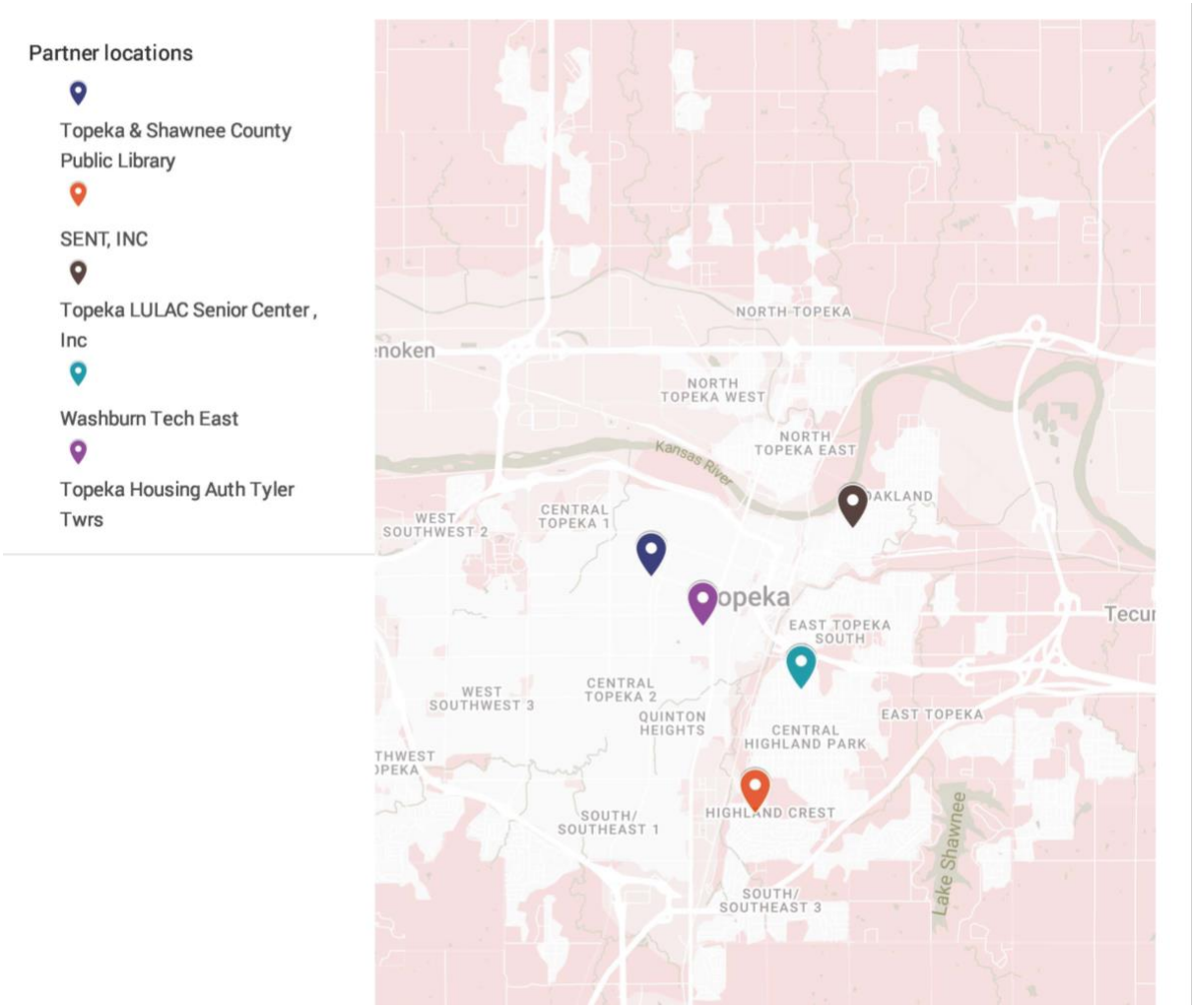
In partnership, the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library identified several of its long-time community partner organizations in East Topeka. The library director then invited these partners to serve as host sites for group interviews during the fall of 2024 and winter of 2025. Partner organizations whose directors agreed to participate were SENT Topeka, Topeka Housing Authority, Topeka LULAC Senior Center, and Washburn Tech East. In addition to inviting its partner organizations to serve as host research sites, two library leaders provided feedback during research-question development beginning in late summer 2024 and reviewed the semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C) and provided feedback before host organization recruitment began.

Meet the site partners

Among considerations of the library leaders when seeking partner hosts was the type of library service provided in or near the organization, and that the site was in or near East Topeka, the area under consideration for a co-located library site or branch (see Figure 3.2). Library services provided in or near the interview sites are weekly Bookmobile stops at SENT Topeka and Washburn Tech East, and mobile Red-Carpet service at LULAC senior center and Topeka Housing Authority's Tyler Towers. Mobile Red-Carpet service strives to create a mini library feel. Folding tables are brought in and set up with book displays featuring the genres and authors most typically sought by patrons at that location. The schedule is consistent, and the librarians staffing the program can set up borrower accounts, provide research assistance, book suggestions, and the like, just as any other TSCPL librarian on a Bookmobile or in the library building can. They can also deliver anything that can be checked out, including specialty items like cake pans or craft kits – if the patron knows to request them.

In the following section, I briefly explain historical and contextual factors relevant to each interview host partnering organization. Figure 3.2 provides a map of the library and interview locations.

Figure 3.2. Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library and partner interview locations



SENT

SENT Topeka is a non-profit dedicated to development of East Topeka's Highland Crest (Hi-Crest) neighborhood. SENT stands for Strengthening and Equipping Neighborhoods Together. SENT's office is in a community resource center at 455 SE Golf Park Blvd., Office 121, Topeka, KS 66605 (Figure 3.2 – red pin). In addition to home renovation and construction programs concentrated on the neighborhood, the organization offers mental health care,

addiction recovery-related health care, neighbor advocacy, services for unsheltered Topekans including operation of one of Topeka's only warming/cooling centers during extreme weather incidents, and a you-choose food pantry that serves approximately 600 families per month (SENT, 2025). SENT offices are in a former elementary school that now serves as a community resource center. Also in the building is a SENT-affiliated church and other agencies. The building's parking lot is a weekly Bookmobile location (TSCPL, 2024), and a library book return box is among the resources outside its front door. Participants at this location were part-time and full-time SENT staff. We gathered in the community party room, and there were no interruptions.

Topeka Housing Authority's Tyler Towers

Topeka Housing Authority and the affiliated non-profit, THA Inc., administer federal Section 8 housing choice vouchers in the Topeka community and operate affordable housing developments and on-site support programs and services. Operations offices and several housing communities are in East Topeka (THA, 2024; THA Inc., 2024). Among the housing communities, residents of Tyler Towers, a near-Downtown senior-housing building, were most enthusiastic about the research project. Thus, the interview occurred at the building, located at 600 SW 14th St, Topeka, KS 66604 (Figure 3.2 – purple pin). The building, designated for those 55+, is a Meals on Wheels community site and receives Red-Carpet service from TSCPL every other Friday (THA, 2024; TSCPL, 2024). All group interview participants were building residents. We gathered in the community room. There were minor interruptions, but no disruptions, as other residents used the vending machines or greeted interviewees as they passed in the hallway.

Topeka LULAC Senior Center

Topeka LULAC Senior Center is the city's only full-time senior center. Opened in 1973 by Topeka's League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) Council #11071 to serve elders in the Oakland neighborhood, today the day center serves any Topekan 60 years and older or of any age with disabilities (Topeka LULAC, 2025). Like Tyler Towers, LULAC serves as a Red-Carpet service location for the library, every other Tuesday (TSCPL, 2024). The senior center is located at 1502 NE Seward Ave, Topeka, KS 66616 (Figure 3-2 – charcoal pin). All participants in the group interview were regular LULAC patrons. Just before the interview, patrons heard a presentation on avoiding phone-based fraud attempts. As the interview preparations began, patrons had the chance to order Girl Scout Cookies and sign up to attend the circus during the next week. Just prior to the interview's conclusion, a volunteer delivered Meals on Wheels lunches.

Washburn Tech East

Washburn Tech East, 2014 SW Washington St., 66607 (Figure 3.2 – teal pin), opened in 2019 with the goal of meeting educational needs in East Topeka. Affiliated with Washburn University, scholarships and support services are available for students in a GED program and seven post-secondary programs in healthcare, construction, and manufacturing-related fields. English language classes also are available (Washburn Tech, 2024). Washburn Tech East's parking lot is a weekly Bookmobile site for the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library (TSCPL, 2024). Participants at this location were students and instructors. We gathered in a conference room, and there were no interruptions.

Recruitment of participants

Recruitment information for this study was shared only through the four library-partner organizations that served as interview hosts, creating a purposive sample (Guest, 2014) of would-be patrons of a potential future library branch in the geographic community of the host organizations. There was no requirement that participants be a library card holder or active user of the library or its services. I did not have interpersonal relationships with any recruited participants.

The process of participant recruitment varied by partnering organizations. In the case of SENT, Washburn Tech East, and Topeka Housing Authority, the entity's director, who was contacted by the library's director, delegated to a staff member the task of working with me to coordinate the group interview date and time. LULAC Senior Center's director coordinated with me directly. Each entity received a poster I created that they could distribute as they chose (see Appendix D). LULAC Senior Center shared the poster on its Facebook page and discussed it in the week leading up to the interview. Washburn Tech East instructors included the poster in class announcements and one class attended with their instructor. At SENT, participating staff received a calendar invite from an administrative assistant and were on the clock for the interview. Tyler Towers participants either attended the monthly building meeting the week prior, at which I was invited to present an overview of my project and coordinate the time for the group interview, or participants were notified and directly invited by someone who attended that building meeting.

Participants in the afternoon group interviews – at Washburn Tech East, SENT, and Tyler Towers – received a box lunch for their time, provided by the library's café. Lunch included a deli sandwich, chips, cookie, and a can of soda. At Tyler Towers this meal was the stated

motivation for engagement by three participants. I visited LULAC Senior Center in the late morning and brought two dozen donuts, purchased by the library. No participants there, Washburn Tech East, or SENT said the food motivated them to engage in the conversation.

Per my Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved protocol (Approval Letter is Appendix A), participation was open to anyone 18 and older who was comfortable participating without English translation and willing to provide written informed consent. An additional voluntary biographical information sheet was provided to all participants prior to the start of the interview (Appendix B). All participants completed at least most of that voluntary form, from which the demographic details presented in the next section are known. At LULAC, two participants had low-vision, and I read the informed consent documents to each of them individually.

Meet the participants

Each of the 31 participants were active patrons of an organization that has a long-standing partnership with the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library. To ensure confidentiality, participants were given the opportunity to use a pseudonym if they chose. Throughout this dissertation, they are identified by the first name they indicated on their form. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 94 (12 were in their 50s or younger, 19 in their 60s or older). Participants self-reported race or ethnicity, with 11 identifying as Black or African American; 10 identifying as white; nine identifying as Latino, Latina, Hispanic, or Mexican American; and one identifying as Native American and white. Among them, 16 reported that they have an active Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library card. Four others reported they have a card but are not certain that it is active. One reported having never been to a public library.

Table 3.2. Research participants

Participant	Age	Race/Ethnicity	TSCPL cardholder
Allisa	18	white	no
Antoinette	59	African American	active!
April	59	American / Black	active!
Becky	60	Native Am. / white	active?
Beverly	78	Black	no
Bonnie	67	Black	active!
Bruni	76	Hispanic	active!
Debra	69	white	active!
Edward	71	Black	unreported
Edwin	76	Hispanic	active!
Fred	64	white	active!
George	73	Black	active!
Glenda	88	Caucasian	active!
Gloria	50	Latina	active?
Isaias	32	Hispanic	active?
Jay	40	white	active?
JB	60s	Black	not now
Jean	26	Latino	active!
Jennie	94	Mexican American	not now
Johnathan	44	Black	active!
Juan	37	Latino	active!
Karla	26	Latina	no
Leshaun	28	African American	active!
Maggie	67	white	active!
Mark	66	white	no
Patti	73	white	active!
Sam	70	Hispanic	active?
Shirley	71	white	active!
Steven	67	Black	unreported
Tricia	46	white	active!
Vincent	60	Black	active!

Data Collection

Several data collection tactics were utilized during this study. My primary interest is the transcriptions of audio-recorded group interviews. Secondarily, I created the voluntary self-reported biographical information forms so participants could self-determine how they would be described (see Appendix B). In addition, observational field notes were taken before, during, and just after the group interviews, and interview-coordination emails between me, the directors and/or staff of the four host organizations, and library leaders were reviewed.

Interviewing

Group interview was selected for three principal reasons. First, the prospect of hosting numerous one-on-one interviews at the host sites was too burdensome for the collaborating organizations. Second, I presumed it would be less intrusive and less intimidating if someone could choose to participate in a known location with someone they already know. For example, in the initial stages of coordination it was unknown if transportation to an interview site would be necessary for participants. Third, unlike focus groups, group interview allowed each participant to answer every question and specific follow-up questions were directed to them based on what they shared. At the beginning of each interview, I proposed, and participants agreed, to a consecutive turn-taking approach to answering questions to ensure each participant had a chance to speak. While some participants chose to share more than others, this method minimized the potential for a few voices to dominate. While these interviews were in many ways structured like focus groups, my facilitation method and focus on participant storytelling allowed them to be more like in-depth interviews with many participants (Stewart, et al., 2009; Bhattacharya, 2017).

I gathered a range of perspectives by hearing from 31 community members at four distinct library partner organizations: Washburn Tech East (9 participants), SENT Topeka (7

participants), Topeka Housing Authority's Tyler Towers (10 participants), and Topeka's LULAC Senior Center (5 participants). Group interviews occurred over a span of three months, with one in December 2024, two in January 2025, and one in February 2025. Interview recordings are between 36 and 54 minutes long. Recording did not begin until the informed consent process was complete.

Practically speaking, audio recordings obtained through Zoom became codable transcripts. During each interview, two different computers were recording voices from two locations within the room to maximize the likelihood that everyone's words could be preserved. This was planned to overcome the possibility of background noise and to build in redundancy in case of equipment failure for any reason. To create the codable transcripts, I compared the Zoom-generated transcript file from one computer's recording to the sound recordings from both computers and checked the corrected transcript against my written observational field notes (Bhattacharya, 2017; Johnson, 2017).

Field Notetaking

As the only researcher in the room during each interview, I utilized the semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C) as a protocol and Zoom audio recordings to preserve the discussions for analysis. I also jotted observational notes with particular focus on paralanguage and engaged with participants as they spoke. As participants read and contemplated the informed consent documents, I took observational notes of the room, seating arrangements, and interactions between participants, in addition to answering any questions. During the interview, I took notes about main points made by participants and paid particular attention to overall intonation and body language, including body movements and facial expressions, as stories were recalled. Within three hours after each group interview, I wrote a reflexive memo about what I

thought, felt, and learned from the participants. It was during this time that I created a participant profile document, capturing an observed physical description of each participant and key highlights about each individual's story. No photos or video were taken to protect participant confidentiality.

Participants self-describing

All 31 participants chose to complete at least most questions on the voluntary biographical information form (Appendix B). On the form, I asked participants to report the first name they wanted used in research reports, if they had an active library card (used within the last year), their age at the time of the interview, their race/ethnicity, and if they wanted me to follow up with them. Relevant information from these documents contributes to participant descriptions (see Table 3.2).

Emailing

From the beginning of the collaboration process with Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library through the conclusion of the group interviews, I sent 79 emails to and received 70 emails from 10 individuals involved at the library or one of the four group interview host organizations. Four phone calls and some coordination texts also were necessary. Collaboration with TSCPL included three in-person meetings prior to study launch and one after interviews were complete. This communication record represents the commitment of the library to this community-engaged endeavor and of each of the four library partners who chose to participate in this research project. The partner directors' enthusiastic support was made clear by rapid response to the library's CEO, Marie Pyko, use of multiple exclamation points, and responses such as: "Hello Marie! Thank you for reaching out and of course we would love to help with this!" (T. George, personal communication, November 12, 2024).

Data Analysis

I took a three-level coding approach to my analysis of the transcripts, utilizing Microsoft Word and Excel rather than coding software for this work, which I completed manually without assistance from artificial intelligence of any kind. This section will provide detailed description of that data analysis process. Throughout the stages of analysis, I maintained focus on participants' own words in storytelling presentation (Lander, 2017).

Transcript clean-up and "Dwelling" in the data

I spent a lot of time working with the transcripts, completing primary-cycle coding simultaneously with verification, correction, and annotation of the written record of each group interview (Tracy, 2020). To do so, I followed the Zoom-generated transcript from one recording while listening to first one then the other audio recording to correct and verify the written record of each group interview. If the interviewee expressed obvious emotion verbally, such as giggles, raised or lowered volume of voice, or higher or lower pitch of voice, or if the response elicited crosstalk from others in the room, I recorded this on the transcript. I also included on the transcript field-noted instances of paralanguage, including facial expressions, shifts in posture, or gestures (Martin & Zappavigna, 2019). I added such expression notes in brackets where they occurred in the statement. During this phase, I also checked the accuracy of information, such as the name of a branch library or the year a school closed. I notated any such corrections or additions in brackets at the end of the comment, including the source.

Once I was confident that each transcript was complete and accurate, I started iterative analysis (Tracy, 2020), moving back and forth between reflection on the theories that informed my research and the participant responses. I read each of the four transcripts consecutively twice in one day and once the next morning before I did anything "to" them. Thus, I sought to "dwell"

with the responses as described by Tracy (2020). After each transcript reading, I wrote reflective memos about initial and tentative interpretations.

Qualitative analysis process: From domains of experience to relationality

I proceeded with the next stage of analysis modeling that of Bennett and Vidal-Hall (2000). The researchers explored interview participants' experience-focused narratives of spousal death. After a process of transcript-cleaning and initial reading similar to mine, Bennett and Vidal-Hall (2000) then conduced line-by-line coding, which led to identification of domains of experience that were present among most of the collected narratives. Bennett and Vidal-Hall (2000) connect each domain of experience to an aspect of participants' widow identity, which they describe in relational terms. Likewise, I noticed that library patrons' domains of experience included several themes that connected to their relationship with the library.

During this first stage of reflexive reading, I noticed initial domains – Introduction, Knowledge, Wonder, Proximity, and Third-Place (See Table 4.2). I color-coded the transcripts by domain, highlighting domain-relevant responses with the appropriate color. A few responses reflected more than one domain. When they did, the specific elements were color-coded accordingly, and I included the response in both domains in the next phase. Next, I moved all domain-relevant responses into an Excel Workbook with one worksheet per domain. This allowed me to read the information in two ways. For example, I could read everything all participants said about Wonder. I could also easily read everything George said about Wonder. This allowed me to notice different points within the domains. I recorded these observations in my notes and rearranged the narrative blocks within the spreadsheet to better align them.

Coding Levels

My first level of coding included primary-cycle coding and transcript correction, as well as iterative coding to identify the initial domains. Level two was a structural analysis, and level three was a thematic analysis. Levels two and three, respectively, are detailed below.

Focused coding: Structural analysis

Structural level analysis allows for "broader examination of relationships among certain patterns with the goal of constructing and developing a theory that depicts or explains a particular phenomenon" (Johnson, 2017, p. 121). Reviewing the responses in this way helped me see that the unique stories shared by participants were commonly linked to broader issues, including access barriers such as transportation access, effects of poverty, and lack of social or cultural knowledge about libraries outside of school (see Table 4.1). At least one participant shared each of the examples included in Table 4.1. Most of the examples were shared several times across all four interview sessions. These insights from participants are especially noteworthy because while my research questions anticipated barriers, my interview questions did not presume them to exist. For example, at no point was anyone asked: "What barriers did you experience?" Instead, questions asked them to consider, for example: "How was the library thought of and talked about as you were growing up?"

Focused coding: Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis allowed me to focus on the stories shared as explanations and insights (Ayre & McCaffery, 2002; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vais Moradi & Snelgrove, 2019; Riessman, 2008). The themes within the domains of experience were clear quickly, but the relationality connections came when I was able to zoom-out and consider participants' reflections. That led to my understanding of how the domains of experience I heard about in participant responses

indicate various qualities of personal connections to the library (see Table 4.2). These Library Connections aim to convey the tenor of relationality expressed by interviewees.

Researcher Ethics and Positionality

Ethical research design is a crucial tenet of high-quality qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Ethical behavior also is crucial in any human interaction, but especially in situations when cultural differences may introduce power dynamics that disadvantage or emphasize societal marginalization. Research design choices to support participants telling their own stories reflect an ethics of care (Wiles, 2013).

My primary procedural ethics concern related to participant recruitment. It was not possible to represent the full Topeka community population across all intersectional demographics within the interview sample, so a purposive sample was sought as it related to the library's identified partner organizations (Guest, 2014). This research design recognizes community members with any level of library experience have important and relevant stories to share. Going into each group interview I had limited or no awareness of who would be in the room. I also considered that collaborating with formal entities on community-engaged research is possible but can reenforce notions that "'engagement' is often a top-down, bureaucratic process that can marginalize and exclude" (Lach et al., 2022, p. 1207). Therefore, it was important to explain the library's role as well as my responsibilities as a researcher. I also was cognizant that my questions could spark expectations about future library locations, and, therefore, I emphasized that the library's strategic plan did not mean that a branch library would open nor that it would be within walking distance of their interview site.

Data interpretation, findings representation, and recognition of participant contribution also required ethical consideration. Reciprocal community engaged research practices (Rowe,

2014) required I was gathering knowers, not dictating meaning because "[t]he participant is the authority on the meaning in the text" (Josselson, 2007, p. 551). To that end, I offered interviewees an opportunity to receive and discuss findings. Some opted to receive information about future presentation opportunities as well. Lastly, I had no research budget with which to compensate participants for their time. However, the light meal provided by the library for each interview served both to lower barriers to participation and to thank participants for engaging. I have sent thank you notes to each host organization and plan to visit again at the conclusion of my dissertation to facilitate a conscientious exit (Tracy, 2020).

Positionality

In each of the four interview settings of this study I was an outsider with shared interest (Rowe, 2014). As such, I used tactics learned during a decade in newspaper journalism to quickly build rapport. This included attention to my own physical presentation, such as dressing for the casual environments I entered, as well as using polite manners, and ensuring participants had the chance to ask me questions – relevant or not to the study – before the recording began. Some of those questions were about my doctoral studies, or the technology I was using, or the stickers on my laptop, for example. I also brought food and did not rush to leave at each interview's conclusion, personally thanking each participant. During each interview, our common interest in libraries and community life in Topeka became clearer.

Confidentiality

Each interview participant had the opportunity to utilize a pseudonym if they chose. To ensure confidentiality, only first names are used in presentation of findings in the next chapter, and no indication is given whether it is a pseudonym or the participant's given name.

Reliability and Replicability

This qualitative, community-engaged, group interview research was designed, as described above, to be coherent, rigorous, credible, and sincere (Tracy, 2010). As explained, research practice included reflective memos after each interview session, and transparency both for research participants throughout the process and in the dissemination of findings for those who requested it. I intended that this practice increase coherence, rigor, and credibility, and demonstrate sincerity. The prevalence of many of the themes among interviewee responses indicates relevance. Regarding replicability, the phases and steps of my research process appear in Table 3.1.

Ready for Storytime

So far, I have explored the purpose of this study, the contextual scholarship, and the methodological underpinnings of this engaged research process. The 31 interview participants explored with me their experiences with the public library today and throughout their lives. The intent to allow them to speak for themselves will be clear as the next chapter presents narratives and opinions shared by interview participants and the research findings that emerged therefrom.

Chapter 4 - Findings

> *"So, for a kid that lived in a world that always seemed limited, the library was a place that was unlimited, and it had no bounds on me."*
> – Johnathan, 44, research participant

To understand how the past influences the present and future, this community-engaged, qualitative research recorded and interpreted the experiences of would-be library patrons residing in the service area of a potential future library branch. Specifically, the four group interviews conducted for this study facilitated exploration of the lived experiences of patrons of long-standing Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library partner organizations. The community-engaged research with the public library will provide useful knowledge as the library advances the work of its most recent strategic plan. More broadly, this research considers each of the individual stories shared from a critical constructivist perspective and geographic community-based context, listening to the often-invisible aspects of daily life that require more from the least advantaged. My research goal was to advance understanding of how invisible but real social barriers potentially impact minoritized and economically disadvantaged community members' use, access, and perceptions of public libraries. Specifically, this work investigated two research questions:

RQ 1. Why do residents choose to engage or not with their local public library?

RQ 2. In what ways do historical legacies of exclusion impact these choices?

The lived experience of 31 group interview participants – all who live or work in Topeka – highlights the crucial importance of geographic proximity to how patrons relate to the library. Those able to walk to the library, or to a direct bus stop, reported visiting most, often multiple times a week. Those who lived farther away shared that they go to the library when necessary to complete a specific task; for a particular program or resource unavailable elsewhere; or for a pre-

planned outing with their children, grandchildren, or friends. Distance makes the library, in the words of one participant, “not part of my world” of daily activity.

For those unable to drive or who live in public transportation deserts without access to a personal vehicle, auxiliary service, including bookmobile and mobile Red-Carpet services, is their only access to the library in Topeka. Participants explained the differences between “getting lost in the books” of the library’s stacks and the limited options of the bookmobile, which lacks the sense of wonder that the building creates. Similarly, patrons who live closest were most often seeking the “productive environment” of the library’s spaces. Meanwhile, those reliant on auxiliary services have no such environment to access because the bookmobile’s limited space does not include furniture. Despite that, their enthusiasm for ability to access auxiliary service was clear. In addition to wishing the library was closer to their homes, interviewees imagined an ideal library with longer hours on Saturdays, coffee available on the weekends from the in-library café, and more spaces that would encourage patrons to get comfortable with a book and stay awhile.

Whether they first encountered the public library as a young person because of their family or school or as an adult trying to get something done, the interviewees thought of the public library as a worthy community asset. Several interviewees – all patrons of library-partnered organizations but not recruited because of their status as library users – were effusive about the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library (TSCPL) as the best they had ever experienced in any community in which they had lived or visited. The American Library Association recognized TSCPL as its 2016 Library of the Year, and those effusive interviewees each mentioned the honor. Interviewees were happy with the service, programming, meeting spaces, technology, exhibits, and materials of all kinds available at the TSCPL – when they could

access them. It is also noteworthy that no one shared any unpleasant interactions with library staff, and one interviewee made the point to say he has never heard of any such experience from anyone he knows.

Rather than experiencing the library as a space created for someone else, interviewee responses reveal that distance and lack of transportation were the most significant barriers to fully using the library's abundant resources. Thus, transportation deserts and under-resourced neighborhoods keep persons of color from fully experiencing the public library as equals, though for distinct reasons than initially postulated per my research rationale. Nevertheless, given the historical legacy of racial segregation in planning and social infrastructure reviewed in chapter two, my findings demonstrate inequality and injustice in library access due to factors outside of the library's direct control.

Table 4.1. Participant-identified barriers

Each of these barriers and the provided examples were identified by interviewees during their responses. ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed, and indicates families and individuals earning above federal poverty guidelines and struggling to make ends meet (United For ALICE, 2025).

Barrier and provided examples
Physical distance from the library: not walkable, travel pattern
Transportation-related: hassle of car, don't drive/have to pay for rides, can't walk as far as the bus stop, transportation desert
Circumstances of poverty: Parents couldn't go to library, was not safe to be there without parents, working during Bookmobile visits, limited library hours on weekends, limited leisure time, proportion of ALICE-identified families in neighborhood/multiple jobs creates exhaustion
Lack of social or cultural knowledge of libraries outside of schools: Parents didn't know about the library; found as adult, no one they knew as a child used the library

Because transportation access was so often mentioned related to accessing the library building, information about personal transportation access and primary library access point (Table 4.2 below) was drawn from participants' narrative responses. Describing personal transportation, a 'yes' indicates the participant is the sole driver of the vehicle. Shared

transportation signifies the participant is not the sole driver of the vehicle. Limited signifies a limited driving range explained by the participant, which does not include the library building, but does include bookmobile location. A 'no' signifies no personal vehicle access is available, and the participant relies on the bus, hired rides, friends and family, or a combination of those for transportation. Describing current library access, the primary access is listed first. If listed as Red Carpet +, for example, the participant indicated primary use of the mobile Red Carpet service, with occasional visits to the library building. If listed as TSCPL +, for example, the participant indicated primary use of the library building, but occasional use of an auxiliary service.

Table 4.2 reveals that only two participants with no personal transportation indicated their primary use of the library was in the building itself: Leshaun, who walks from his residence, and George, who takes a direct bus from his residence. Details are shared later in the chapter. Specific to library access, the table indicates more than 40 percent of study participants rely on auxiliary library service as their primary means of access. The vital services provided by mobile Red Carpet and Bookmobile stops are library lifeline for those patrons. Regarding personal transportation, no participants who identified as white and had access to a car reported they shared a vehicle. In contrast, more than half of participants of color with access to a car discussed sharing the vehicle with at least one person in their family. While this data is limited, it speaks to the strains of downstream effects of racialized disadvantage.

Table 4.2. Participant transportation and library access

Participant	Personal vehicle	Current library access	Race/Ethnicity
Allisa	Unknown	Hometown library	white
Antoinette	Yes	TSCPL	African American
April	No	Red Carpet +	American / Black
Becky	No	Red Carpet only	Native Am. / white
Beverly	No	Red Carpet only	Black
Bonnie	Yes, shared	TSCPL	Black
Bruni	Yes, shared	TSCPL	Hispanic
Debra	No	Red Carpet only	white
Edward	Unknown	Red Carpet only	Black
Edwin	Yes, shared	TSCPL	Hispanic
Fred	Yes	Hometown, TSCPL	white
George	No	TSCPL	Black
Glenda	Yes, limited	RC, Bookmobile	Caucasian
Gloria	No	TSCPL	Latina
Isaias	Yes	TSCPL	Hispanic
Jay	Yes	TSCPL	white
JB	No	Red Carpet only	Black
Jean	Yes, shared	TSCPL	Latino
Jennie	No	Red Carpet only	Mexican American
Johnathan	Yes	TSCPL	Black
Juan	Yes, shared	TSCPL	Latino
Karla	Unknown	None	Latina
Leshaun	No	TSCPL	African American
Maggie	No	Red Carpet +	white
Mark	Yes	Hometown, TSCPL	white
Patti	No	Red Carpet +	white
Sam	Yes	TSCPL	Hispanic
Shirley	No	Red Carpet only	white
Steven	No	Red Carpet only	Black
Tricia	Yes	TSCPL +	white
Vincent	No	Red Carpet only	Black

As described in the previous chapter, the multi-stage analysis surfaced participant-identified barriers to accessing the library (see Table 4.1 and Table 4.2), domains of experience discussed by participants, relevant themes within those domains, and connections that link

participants' experiences to their relationship with the public library (see Table 4.3). Table 4.3 reports the findings from domain through connection.

Table 4.3. Domains, themes, and connections

Presentation of domains, themes and relational connections gleaned from data analysis.

Domain of Library Experience	Themes analyzed	Library Connections
Introduction	Family, School, Adult + purpose	Finding
Wonder	Getting lost in the books, Boundless access, Productive environment	Feeling
Knowledge	Resources beyond books, Space for civic engagement, Task support	Using
Proximity	Geographic proximity, Comfort and ease create willingness to claim, Barriers as injustice	Relating
Third-Place	A place to spend time, More would be even better, Auxiliary access is better than no access	Imagining

Five major relational connections surfaced during the group interviews that are key to both memories and current use and wishes for the public library and its services: Finding, Feeling, Using, Relating, and Imagining. The episodic narrative questions elicited memories and explanations of current experiences while the remaining queries encouraged responses focused on thoughts and hopes about the present and the future. Memories especially connected to Finding, which can most concisely be described as each participant's library origin story. The domains of Feeling, Using, and Relating were explored through a mix of narrative and non-narrative responses. Imagining was predominantly shared through non-narrative responses.

This chapter will explore each of these domains of experience and relational connections in detail, as well as the themes identified within the domains of library experience (see Table 4.2). How each of these domains of experience and ultimate relational connections relates to the

research questions will also be elaborated. The chapter concludes with a summary of six major findings.

Domain 1: Introduction

Jennie, 94, lit up and giggled as she recalled the memory of her first visit to a public library, from about 1947:

> I started working pretty young, like 14 years old. I never heard about the library. My parents didn't know anything about the library either. When I was in high school, I was a junior, I played hooky for a day and went to the library and spent my day there. And I got caught. One of my teachers, my Spanish teacher, knew my mother and told her that I was not at school that day. And I couldn't convince my mother that I was at the library because I wanted to, to experience that. I was amazed at all the books there!
>
> At that time, it was on 8th Street. I used to hear about it. I used to hear my friends talking about the library. But after school I had to go to work right away so I never did get to go anyplace other than just working. I would go by the library every day on my walk to work and I used to hear my friends talk about the library. I was just very curious as to what it looked like, what was really in there. That day I just went through it all! I was just going through books and looking at them. And I was just amazed about the books, you know. I spent a day there looking through books and reading, but I can't remember what I read.
>
> At that time there was a lot of discrimination in Topeka, but I could be where I wanted that day. I spent the whole day there just checking it out, looking at things. It was wonderful.

Jennie, who identified herself as Mexican American, recalled how there were shops and restaurants downtown that required her to use the back door to enter, or a back window to take a sack lunch. She said she did not consider applying for a library card or check out any books that day because she knew she would not have the time or opportunity to return. Her days were full of school and work. Her eventual reacquaintance to the public library came when she was in her 50s because she needed to learn something for her job. Thereafter, she began to visit regularly, taking her grandchildren to the library and encouraging her children to do so also.

> I stressed reading to them. They really enjoy it. I stress the library to my kids, grandkids, and great-grandkids now, especially in the summertime. 'Take 'em to the library! Have 'em check out some books!'

Jennie was the oldest of the interview participants, and the only one who ever visited the long-ago demolished library on the capitol grounds. Among the 31 participants, Jennie was also the only one enticed to visit the library by friends as a teen. The others first experienced the public library as a child with their family members (7) or with their teachers and classmates (7) or went for the first time as an adult for a specific purpose (13), as was the case for Jennie's return to the library decades after she played hooky. One interviewee had never been to a public library. Two interviewees grew up with no library in their community but had books at home, and one grew up down the street from a library branch and could not recall how she was first introduced to it because it was so infused into her childhood. It is noteworthy that stories of sharing the library with their own children came from participants with all three types of library origin stories explored here: Family introduction, School introduction, and Introduction as an adult with specific purpose.

Theme 1: Family introduction

Allisa, 18, first went to the library in her hometown with her older sister. Now, she takes her little brother and sometimes his friends along when she goes there to study.

> I was like 5 or 6, probably, with my sister. She had some kind of project to do, and she didn't want to have to go alone. So, I told her I would go with her, and I just kind of remember sitting down in the beanbag chair as she got her little papers and did what she was doing. … [over time] It was something my parents enforced. They like the fact that me and my siblings were going down to the library. They were just always working or busy with something. It's a place I can just hang out with my friends, my siblings, and cousins.

Allisa was the youngest interviewee. A young white woman from smalltown Kansas, Allisa said she does not think of herself as a reader. Nevertheless, she likes the library because it is comfortable, helpful, and a good place to be in a town with few such places for young people. She describes her parents' encouraging visits to the library, but not taking her there, implying that her parents believe the library to be a safe place for her, her siblings, and her cousins.

Steven, 67, recalled riding the city bus with his mom to the library as a child. "She made me go. She wanted me to learn somethin'." His positive inflection and posture that went from slouch to upright with a forward lean indicated he had more affinity for the libraries at the elementary schools he attended than visits to the public library – likely because of proximity. As he remembered, "We lived across the street from there [Monroe School], and I could get books sometimes in the summer. They had everything!"

Based on their respective storytelling, Steven's Black mother and Allisa's white parents valued the opportunities created by access to the public library – Steven's mother so much so

that she 1) invested the time and effort to take him there by city bus regularly, and 2) ensured he knew how to access the public library by city bus should he need to on his own. By making it part of his routine, whether he particularly enjoyed it or not, Steven remembers his mother demonstrating the value she placed on the assets of the library. As he recalled how she would take him on the bus, others in the group cross-talked about how mothers want what is best for their children and knowledge is power.

April, 59, was born completely blind and gained some vision during her childhood. When asked to recall an early library memory, she shared that her school and her father both had important roles in her introduction:

> I do remember when I very first went to the library here in Topeka, Kansas – of course I left Topeka quite a number of times. But I had a nice, what's called an itinerant teacher, because I went to Parkdale Elementary School and they had a library there, but the library is mostly, for, you know, sighted folks. So, they said that they had a department there in the (public) library called talking books. At that time, it was downstairs in the basement. So, my dad went and took me to the library, and I was able to check out books down there, and they were on cassette, and I had a special machine, and I could listen to all kinds of books about all kinds of stuff. And then, when I learned that there were cassettes and records you could check out from the regular library, I did that as well. And that's how I really became a voracious reader. We also had films where you could check out films and watch little, you know, movies or whatever. And then once I learned how to get to the library on my own by riding the bus, I could go there and get, you

know, a bag of books or whatever. It was very exciting to know that there were things available that I could access as well.

April, who identified herself as American and is Black presenting, said her dad was more of a reader than others in her family, and it was a connection for the two of them that grew as she became more interested in stories, especially mysteries. Her recollection speaks to the power of reinforcement, as her father helped her pursue her curiosity that the school library sparked. And like Steven's mom, April's dad ensured she knew how to access the public library by bus. Thus, those who were introduced to the library by their parents were also given a measure of freedom, moving them closer to independence and gifting them a tool toward becoming their own self-improving person, though in a way that complemented their parents' values and choices. April's excitement at the ability to access the library – because she could get there independently by bus – indicates the freedom she felt after her dad taught her how and believed she could.

Theme 2: School introduction

Antoinette, 59, was visibly transported as she recalled an elementary school fieldtrip to the central library in downtown Omaha, Nebraska. She smiled, leaned in, and raised her hands from the table as she said:

> It was amazing! It was exciting! I was eager to take what I had learned from my teacher, because I was a young girl, I was eager to take what I learned from my teacher, as far as learning how to find the books and the subjects that I wanted, that I was interested in. There weren't computers then. We were using the card catalog and the Dewey Decimal System. I was eager to go in there, do what the teacher showed me how to do, and find my books. It was a beautiful library! So, it was a good experience.

> … Well, as a kid, my grandma didn't take me to the library. We didn't go to the library. I went to the library with, with my school. My school took me to the library. And once I had that one experience in the library, and then once I became an adult, that was something I wanted to expose my kids to. And so, as a parent, I made a habit of taking my kids to the library quite frequently. And still now, I, I love taking my kids, or we go to the library to do many things. I'll suggest that if they need to have something done – 'Go to the library!'

Antoinette's understanding of her school fieldtrip to the central branch of the Omaha Public Library as the seed from which she grew to be an active library patron aligns with the practice of homemade citizenship (Mitchell, 2020) explored in Chapter 2. Antoinette focused – as demonstrated by her determined tone and upright, forward-leaning posture while retelling – on what she did with what her school provided, rather than what she couldn't do.

Isaias, 32, was about seven years old when he first went to a public library on a school field trip. "I signed up to go, I got the forms done and everything. I wanted to see it," he recalled. He explained that it was not safe for him to go to the library on his own in his New Jersey neighborhood, and no one in his family could take him. Now, as he sees how much his children enjoy trips to the library, he said he often wistfully thinks: "I could have used the library more." He ensures that his children have the opportunity that he did not to regularly visit the library. He also went along this school year when his son's class took a fieldtrip to TSCPL.

Vincent, 60, took a school fieldtrip to the Topeka public library but said as a child his only regular library access was at his grade school, Monroe, which was down the street from his family's house. He grew up on the same street as Steven, though they were not classmates. "We got to go once a week to the school library. I remember the paperbacks in the big room. There

were shiny floors and lots of windows. You had to be quiet in there." Today, Vincent's only access to the library is through mobile Red-Carpet Service, which visits the building where he lives every other week.

Johnathan, 44, recalled special trips to the branch library nearest his neighborhood with his elementary school, as well as encouragement from his mom to read and go to the library on his own. His speech was quick and his intonation full of enthusiasm as he recalled:

> I grew up in Dallas, and in Dallas public schools. You know, we have our school libraries, but every year when you were in elementary, they would take kids to the local branch library. The one closest to my house was the Lancaster-Kiest Library. They always asked the question about, you know, if you had this many days late past your date to bring the book back, how much do you owe? I always remember the answer to the question was, $1. You would owe $1. And they would always read a story to us when we went. We would get on the bus, the school bus, to go there. But that experience was always so great because, even in elementary school, when I had to do research and papers and everything, I knew how to ride the city bus to that library, and the thing that got me is I grew up in an under resourced neighborhood to a single mom. The library was the first place I went where there was no limit, where I didn't feel under resourced, because they had a rule that after you checked out your first book and returned it on time, you could check out as many books as you wanted. So, for a kid that lived in a world that always seemed limited, the library was a place that was unlimited, and it had no bounds on me.

Johnathan's story is similar to others in noteworthy ways. Like Steven, April, and Allisa, Johnathan's mother encouraged his use of the library. Like Antoinette, his school helped him learn to use the library, which led to later access. But for Johnathan, transportation access led to earlier utilization of the library than Antoinette was able to realize. Listening to these stories in concert, we can see how crucial it is for family and school to be working together to support library access.

Johnathan shared recollections that were more about being in the library than about what he checked out from the library. In fact, most of the shared narratives focused not on transaction with the library, but what the library allows them to do, experience, and achieve. For Johnathan, earning free pizza through Book It! motivated him to be a reader and his branch library allowed him to reach that goal. When the program ended along with his elementary years, Johnathan started playing more video games and visiting the library for homework specific needs. He graduated from college with a degree in chemical engineering and now works as a pastor. It was during his time in Bible college, he recalled, that his love of reading returned.

Theme 3: Introduction as an adult with specific purpose

Sam, 70, first went to the public library in Topeka because he was researching family genealogy and heard about the Topeka Room and research help that the library provides. He said he was then in his 40s. Sam attended school outside of Topeka, living in an area that was at the time "out in the country" and is now part of the Topeka library's service area. He recalled this when asked how his family's habits influenced his library experiences: "I think it influenced me a lot. If they knew about it, they were both so busy with work. And at that time, it was quite a long ways away." He was able to visit the library at his grade school weekly.

Becky, 60, said her son loved to be in the library, so she was there to be with him when he was younger. She did not take credit for introducing him to the library or encouraging his visits, but she was glad he found a place that made him happy.

Bonnie, 67, also found the library as an adult, about 25 years ago, because she wanted something to do with her grandchildren that was fun for a range of ages and budget friendly. Since then, she has worked to ensure it could be a resource for her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

> I was raised in a family who didn't have a car growing up. Primarily I was raised on the East Side of Topeka … Once becoming an adult, and I had dropped out of school at 16, which pretty much was what happened in our family. So, after becoming an adult and going back to school for my GED, that's when the world of the library and how useful it was really opened up to me. By that time, I was having grandchildren. So, I started them really early in learning about access, and the importance of education, of reading, and knowledge.
>
> I have one granddaughter that I initially took, she's 28 now, and just a bookworm. And she has children, and she reads to those kids every day. I just love that, because I didn't get that coming from a family of 10 in the sixties and fifties. We didn't get that. Momma didn't have time. Between cookin', cleanin', and everything else. So, just to see that – that's cultural change in my family – it's really a plus. Because they have an opportunity. I feel knowledge is power. I truly believe that, and opportunities and doors will open for them. The more education, the knowledge that is poured into them – that's positive experience, all the way!

Bonnie's recognition of how access to the library contributed to the "cultural change" in her family aligns with the ethos of libraries and library access investment espoused by Andrew Carnegie (Gregorian, 2019) and continues to fuel the sense of purpose and advocacy to prevent and eliminate book deserts for many in Libraryland (Brooks, 2020; Neuman & Moland, 2019). Bonnie said her library trips have always been by car.

What do these library origin stories tell us?

None of the group interviewees specifically mentioned race in their stories of their introduction to the library, but they did communicate things that were related and particularly telling. For example, each interviewee who said their caregivers could not take them or did not know about the library were people of color (Jennie, Sam, Isaias, Johnathan, Bonnie, and Antoinette). Their word choices reflect communication of fact, a pointed absence of blame or shame about the circumstances, and for some included justification that their caregivers were working long hours.

Additionally, three interviewees who attended elementary school in Topeka mentioned their elementary schools by name, tying their experiences to a specific place. Each attended a public school in Unified School District 501, Topeka Public Schools. April, born in 1965, attended Parkdale, in East Topeka. Parkdale was an all-white school from its construction in the early 1900s until Topeka's grade schools were desegregated after the 1954 United States Supreme Court decision in the case of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*. In 1956 Parkdale was among the first in Topeka to hire a Black teacher to teach a desegregated class. That teacher, Jean Price, moved to Topeka in 1956 and was the only Black teacher in the building from 1956 until its closing in 1978 (USD 501, 2025). After the closure of Washington School in 1962, and throughout April's time there, attendance at Parkdale was predominantly students of color.

Washington had been a school in East Topeka. It joined Monroe, Buchanan, and McKinley as schools designated for Black and Latino children (USD 501, 2025; Cheney, 2024). The school district reassigned Washington's principal, Merrill Ross, in 1962 as assistant principal of Parkdale, rather than principal, because "White Topekans were not 'ready for a Black principal to come in and head their students,' [Superintendent Mose] Witson explained [to Ross]" (Cheney, 2024, p. 199).

Steven, born in 1957, and Vincent, born in 1964, both attended and lived within eyesight of Monroe School, in the neighborhood just south of Downtown. Monroe School, now a National Historic Site on the Civil Rights Trail, was the school to which Linda Brown was assigned. Her father, Rev. Oliver Brown, was the plaintiff for whom the United States Supreme Court case gets its name. Monroe closed in 1975 (USD 501, 2025), and Vincent began taking a bus to Lowman Hill Elementary, which is across the street from the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library.

April, Steven, and Vincent were each born after the original *Brown* decision in 1954, but that does not mean they went to integrated schools. By the early 1970s, "Topeka was more spatially and economically segregated than it had been before *Brown*" (Van Delinder, 2004, final section). While the school district claimed it had desegregated all schools by 1961, in time for Steven to start kindergarten, attendance boundaries, policies, and school closure decisions meant two elementary schools remained all white in 1974, and that same year nine of the remaining 11 grade schools had fewer than five children of color assigned to them (Van Delinder, 2004). The other two elementary schools were Monroe and Parkdale. The *Brown* case was reactivated in 1979, this time challenging the *de facto* segregation that persisted in Topeka, which included consideration of socioeconomic segregation, aging infrastructure, the tax-base consequences of

white flight to the suburbs, and school district-established attendance boundaries and policies. Not until July 1994 was the case judicially resolved with U.S. district court acceptance of USD 501's third desegregation proposal (Van Delinder, 2004). "Unlike segregation laws, the social practices that arose to circumvent *Brown* fifty years ago are much more difficult to overcome" (Van Delinder, 2004, final section).

Taken together, these narratives offered library origin stories for patrons nearly universally. I came to understand this as Finding the library. While all the stories shared in the responses to the first questions explored how earliest exposure to the public library was remembered and recalled, it also showed that for many participants the library wasn't the only social infrastructure connected to that access. Several participants visited the library via city bus, and learning to utilize both resources created a sense of independence that connects to feeling, relating, and using the community's assets.

Domain 2: Wonder

"I remember thinking how nice it was, and how it would take a lifetime to go through all of the books," Leshaun, 28, recalled of a recent visit to the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library so he could study. "I didn't mean that in a bad way. It's a good thing!" Leshaun visits the library most often of all the interview participants, typically visiting twice a week or more, usually in the evening. He has seen it all many times. But every now and then it just hits like that, he said. This sense of wonder and awe being among the books was mentioned by many – and came up in each of the four group interviews. However, it was only described in reference to the library building and not regarding the mobile Red-Carpet or Bookmobile.

The sense of Wonder experienced in the library becomes feelings evoked through relation with the library's unique space. Participants described boundless access as freedom provided by

the library's resources and described the productive environment as enabling success and growth. The knowledge-focused space allowed equally for feelings of productivity and awe, but for some patrons, productivity was expressed as necessary and unique to the library, while awe was experienced as a luxury within the library.

Theme 1: Getting lost in the books

Isaias takes his young children to the library monthly or more often, always by car. They ask to go there on outings, and he hopes the public library becomes a place they always enjoy, no matter where they live as adults. He wants to ensure they can feel free to choose for themselves:

> They like the kid area. The kid computers, the school bus, the dinosaur, the toys, and the fish tank. We do the whole thing – 3 hours or so each time. We visit the art gallery or exhibits, the kid's area, the café sometimes. … I'm just hoping that they're OK to make their own choices without feeling pressured by others about what to do. For us back home, when I was growing up, the library was not that good, and not a cool place to be.

Jean, 26, has been to the library with his wife and daughter, but most often his wife brings their child while he is working. He has very little leisure time between work and classes but is glad his family can go to the library for fun and exploration.

Maggie, 67, who sometimes visits the library with her family, talked about the stained-glass windows, the craft kits, cake pans, and book club-in-a-bag resources she's explored while there. "By far, this library has so many things that you can just get lost in there!" But most of the time she relies on the mobile Red-Carpet Service every other week at her apartment building. In that case, she must know what she wants.

> They're super nice. The guys are cordial, friendly, helpful. I couldn't think of the name of a book and Dave got out his laptop and found it right away. They like to talk about books.

On the Red-Carpet's next visit, Dave had the book she wanted ready for her, she recalled.

Glenda, 88, only has access to the mobile Red-Carpet Service through the senior center she attends and the Bookmobile, which she can drive to when it is parked at a grocery store she visits. She said she drives only short distances now and the library is well out her range. Glenda has never been inside the current building. Instead, she recalled her hometown library, in a basement in Carrollton, Missouri, that she would visit as often as she could as a child. She did not recall "getting lost" in the mass of books there but instead shared that she loved the feeling of escape in a story. Her eyes twinkled as she recalled spending most of a summer when she was about 12 reading a hardcover edition of *Little Women.* Nearly 800 pages in hardcover, the book was a commitment, Glenda recalled with a chuckle: "I had to keep renewing it so I could finish."

Books, and the physical space of the library, can be sources for enrichment and escape from the pressures of life – at 12 or 88. The feelings of choice, fun, exploration, independence and freedom described here are key components of "Library Joy," as social media influencer and librarian Mychal Threets (2025) calls it. Isaias hopes the memories he is making with and for his children in the library instill that sense of joy within them, and that that the library can be a place they choose for themselves as adults. Glenda, more than 70 years later, still recalls how she felt meeting Alcott's March sisters on those pages, and the joy she had in finding the book in the library.

Theme 2: Boundless access

Just as Johnathan thought of the public library as boundless when recalling his visits to the branch in Dallas, Debra, 69, and Maggie, 67, had this exchange about the openness of access to materials that libraries offer:

> Debra: They'll let you read any book on the market that's out there. It's on the shelf. No matter what kind of book it is.
>
> Maggie: Yeah, no banned books!
>
> Debra: Right! They put everything out there on the shelf and if you want to read it you can read it, no matter what other people might think or say. You know it's there, and you can read it and make your own choice of what you want to know. I think it's lovely. I don't like it when people try to tell you what you can do. We can choose what we want to read, to learn about, and know.

This was the only mention in my interviews of the importance of the library not censoring available material or restricting access to books, and it came from elder white women. It is clear – through words, posture, intonation, and hand motions – the idea that the library lets patrons choose for themselves was important to Debra and Maggie in supporting their sense of boundless access. I personally share an appreciation for the library's commitment to access that the ethos of providing everything aims to foster. Yet, when I realized this was the only time within the four interviews that centered on the idea of no banned books, I wondered about connections to current politics and to privilege expressed by this concern. Consider commentary in 2020 alongside the Black Lives Matter Movement – that white folks often form book clubs in response to injustice rather than taking a position on the front lines of demonstration (Johnson, 2020; Cineas, 2021; Henry, 2022). Censorship and book banning are certainly not challenges

faced by societies that value freedom of thought and progress for all community members, and yet they are a notably distant level of crisis from physical harm being inflicted upon people of color by government agents. For interviewees with the most normative identities, there is not ever-present need to consider one's safety as Finney (2014) and Mitchell (2020) show it is for minoritized community members.

Debra also recalled how she felt getting her first library card as a student at the intermediate school in Medicine Lodge, Kansas.

> Freedom! I could get my own book, that I wanted to read. This was the time when they stamped the books on the inside and the card, and they signed it. I made sure I didn't have to pay for any late fees 'cause I would have gotten in trouble. They would have had to contact my parents and say something. I knew I'd be in trouble, so I kept track real good of when they were due back.

Now it is a rare thing for her to get to the public library building. She relies instead on the mobile Red-Carpet Service that visits the building where she lives every other week. She still keeps track on her calendar.

George, 73, lives in the same building but said he opts not to use the mobile Red-Carpet Service because he has such a strong preference for browsing in the library. He can walk to a bus stop that can take him directly there and does so about weekly. He said he would be there every day if he could walk all the way to the library's front door. Sometimes he can catch a ride with a friend for extra visits. George pays attention to the presentation schedule and goes to hear about topics of interest fairly regularly. This habit stretches back to his teen years, when he would frequently walk to the library in Garden City, Kansas, when he wanted to get away.

> It opens you up to the world. I go to the library. I get more of what I want when I can just be there. There are different kinds of DVDs, a very good selection of DVDs, and music. I like the place to eat. I like the way they've modernized that and brought it up to date.

Among the participants from the public housing apartment building, George is the only one who said he was able to frequently walk to the bus stop that takes him to the library. The library building is about 1.5 miles from the apartment building. According to Topeka Metro's online trip planner (Topeka Metro, 2025), the #10 bus is a direct route that requires a walk of approximately 9 minutes, then a ride of four stops, and a 1-minute walk from that bus stop to the library's front door. None of the other residents said they were able to make the 9-minute walk to the bus stop, instead relying on family members with cars if they went to the library building. For those without such support systems, their only library access was the mobile Red-Carpet service.

Mobile Red-Carpet aims to provide the same service as does the library. Shirley, 71, moved to Topeka from Ottawa, Kansas, just a few weeks before the interview. She was able to sign up for a library card through the mobile Red-Carpet Service that librarian Dave would bring to her during the next visit day. Areli, the librarian who provides the mobile Red-Carpet service at LULAC Senior Center, is a Spanish speaker who shows up with a smile every time, interviewees said. They shared how she helped the center's programming by curating trivia questions, which she brings each visit because they have enjoyed them so much. Red-Carpet librarians can also deliver anything that can be checked out, including specialty items like cake pans or craft kits – if the patron knows to request them.

The sense of wonder and boundlessness that Leshaun, George, Debra, Maggie, and Johnathan described, and that Isaias and Jean are hoping to foster for their children, is often experienced at the public library and is well documented in non-fiction about libraries and social infrastructure (Klinenberg, 2018; Wiegand, 2015) and in professional publications for librarians (Philpot, 2024). This sense of awe and escape evoked by the library features in fiction as well, such as James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, originally published in 1953, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, originally published in 1970, among others. It is even affectionately termed "Library Magic" (Myers-Canfield, 1999) and "Library Joy" (Threets, 2025) by some within the profession. My interviews further corroborate the existence of this phenomenon of experience in the library building. Participant responses also reveal that the library's auxiliary outreach services are not provoking this feeling. As Maggie recalled, waiting for the Red-Carpet Service to return in two weeks with the book she found – even though she recalled the title after meaningful interaction with a librarian she knows by name and who knows her by name – is just not the same as being *in* the library.

Theme 3: The library as a productive environment

In addition to the abundance of information available, the library is a uniquely productive environment for Leshaun and Allisa. Leshaun said:

> I go because it's a good environment. Sometimes I go for entertainment, but normally I study math or grammar. I do like the quiet space. It helps me stay focused more, as opposed to being at home. It's a productive environment for me, very much.

Allisa agreed. She said when her small-town library is open,

> It's an effective workspace, and they do have quite a few things, but sometimes it's just not very broad with how much there is of everything.

Allisa also sees opportunity for her smalltown library, with sporadic hours and limited offerings, to encourage more active literacy and become a more productive space for the youngest patrons. Right now, she said, she sees those youngsters in the library, but on computers rather than reading. She hopes that her small community library can become a place that entices more young people to enjoy reading, but it needs some updates for that to happen.

> I feel like if they were to advertise things better and kind of pick the library up a little bit – like kind of make it look newer, look like more brighter colors, like somebody said earlier, I feel like if they make it look like a positive place, or more of a positive place to be, I feel like younger kids will want to be there more, and actually look into books and wanting to read. Because what I see, there'll be like 4 or 5 little kids, and they're just on those computers playing like they're not doing anything that necessarily helps them with learning. It's just certain little computer games, or over in the little kid area they'll be playing with the toys. Have somebody there to read to them. I feel like if there might be like an extra 2 or 3 people that were to work at the library to be there to help younger kids like maybe read with them or do a story time and get them more interested in like learning and reading books, then I feel like more people would want to come, or they tell their little friends, and then those friends would tell the parents and bring more people to the community.

To be sure, the productive, knowledge-focused spaces of the library are long-held as non-negotiable within the library as a place. In Topeka, these spaces include the Reading Room, with

study carrels, electric outlets for devices, task lamps and quiet designated by signage. TSCPL also includes reservable team rooms with doors that shut and technology for teleconferences – which have supported countless job interviews, and spaces throughout the library with tables, chairs, or sitting nooks. The ALA's *Library Journal* regularly features articles about design and the importance of distinct types of spaces within the library, with collaboration spaces being highlighted as a key area of growth (Kawaratani, 2024).

Domain 3: Knowledge

Edward, 71, was animated when he recalled visiting the public library as a teen, leaning forward, and gesturing:

> All the information! I used to use it a lot in school. If I had an essay to write or something. This was in Texas. I would walk or catch the bus. Sometimes I went just to get information. I liked to checkout old newspapers and magazines and read about things from the past, about the town, about the country.

Edward does not utilize the library much these days, he said, but is glad to know he could through the mobile Red-Carpet service that stops at his apartment building. J.B., in his 60s, also said he liked knowing he could access the library if he chose, but he has a habit of re-reading the books he keeps on his shelf.

What I heard initially as stories about Knowledge-seeking in the library I came to understand as how patrons are Using the library to accomplish things, and the sense that the library enables them to achieve and attain. This was explained through references to the tools and unique support available through the library, and the way the library building, auxiliary access points, and even digital resources are relevant to interviewee understanding of what the library is

and what it enables them to do. Themes represented here include: Resources beyond books, Space for civic engagement, and Task support.

Theme 1: Resources beyond books

Digital borrowing creates the opportunity for Tricia, 46, to use the library regularly without having to visit the physical location.

> I also use the Hoopla app more frequently. I like the audio books because I can put them on while I'm driving, and I also like it, because even if I check it out and I don't have time to finish it, it stays on my list. It's kind of like my little list of like – 'hey, I'm going to come back to that when I get a moment.' And if I recheck it out it's still in the same spot as I left it, and so my bookmark doesn't get lost either! So, I use that more frequently than making it to the actual library.

Remote access through digital resources also helped Johnathan ensure that the leadership team of his fledgling church could complete book studies without additional strain their financial resources.

> Because they were on Hoopla, all I had to do was get everybody to get a Hoopla account, which I did, and then everybody was able to read – have the book. And that saved us money as a church. We do leadership training, and so I just picked books continuously that were on Hoopla, and then all my leaders could get the books for free. And then we didn't have to spend that money out of the church budget, and we could spend more money helping other people.

Gloria, 50, has visited the library for programs more than for books. It is not easy for her to get there, but a program on accessing college scholarships enticed her to make special arrangements to visit.

These digital offerings and programs represent enrichment the library provides that cannot be found elsewhere. Some of that enrichment is specialized information important enough for which to make special arrangements. Some of it is audio books that offer convenience and reduce stress because renewal is easy through an app and if time lapses the app adds a digital bookmark.

Leshaun enjoys the programming, too, but often struggles to keep track of everything being offered.

> Every so often they'll have classes on finance or something to that effect. … I know as soon as you walk in, they have a little TV with events on it. But I never seem to look at the events until after it's too late.

Fred, 64, lives in a community west of Topeka. He did not visit the library with his family as a child and said that he thinks about the library now only when there is a resource that he cannot access another way. He said he appreciates that the Topeka library provides access to special resources that would cost him a lot to secure on his own.

> They've had anything I need. I've gone for research to use their Internet access for Consumer Reports. So, whenever I've needed any resources, they've been able to help, they've had it.

The experiences shared in these group interviews related to digital resources and in-person programming align with data from the American Library Association (2024) and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (2024b) related to changes occurring nationally in what is being borrowed and how libraries are adapting to ensure the library as a space remains vital in the community. These shared experiences also highlight some of the challenges of communicating those programming opportunities to would-be attendees with different levels of

library patronage, access to email if they have signed up to receive these alerts, or enthusiasm for various genres of programs. Leshaun is the interviewee who visits the library most often and was also one of three who mentioned feeling like they always miss interesting programs. Patti, 73, was another. She joked that the best way to tell her about upcoming programs is to "call the house at 7 p.m.!" She giggled at the ridiculousness of the suggestion that a librarian would have that kind of time. Even though she gets the regularly emailed newsletters, she forgets about the events if she doesn't immediately note them in her calendar.

Theme 2: Space for civic engagement

Mark, who lives about 30 miles north of Topeka and most often utilizes his hometown library, said he wished that the smaller library in his hometown had the ability to serve as a community information space in the same way he perceives Topeka's library does.

> I would like the library to have meeting rooms where speakers are brought in, and a topic can be discussed. Topics relevant to the community, like, you know, any issues facing the community. A place that you can have a dialogue and face to face meeting, rather than just filling out a survey, you send it off to some government agency. Actually, have a dialogue.
>
> At Holton Library, they do an excellent job of having activities and programs for the kids. That's priority one. I'm just saying, for my local hometown, they don't have anything for adults. A meeting room to discuss issues, bringing speakers for the adults to discuss. That would be good. For me, I just think it's a great resource for a place for people to gather together to discuss community issues or to learn more about anything. Medicare. You know anything for older people, or just

> issues that concern people where they feel isolated and need more information. Or need someone to discuss this, to come to a better solution for the community.
>
> I just think it's an excellent place as a gathering point.

Mark's focus on the library as a crucial space for civic life resonates with the library's place as a democratic institution and highlights the challenges faced by libraries in small communities of providing such a space. Topeka's library is seen as a leader for nearby smaller libraries, as evidenced by Mark's comment. He told me as he left the interview that he is trustee of his hometown library. This may indicate opportunities for the Topeka library to lead collaboration and education opportunities in professional outreach efforts.

Theme 3: Task support

Across the board, interviewees recognized the library as a place to find information and as a resource that helped them fulfill life's duties, from taxes to photocopies. Several mentioned accessing the library's information center – shelves on the wall as one walks from the entrance to the book areas – that have everything from tax booklets and State Park guides to community partner information or commonly needed forms.

Edwin and Bruni, both 76, visit the library whenever they need a photocopy or help with a government document. Antoinette said she always sends friends and family members to the library if they need help with forms. Leshaun was focused on information as the purpose of the library and seemed startled by the idea that the library might better reflect him as a young Black man.

> How could a library reflect me? Like, it's a place you go for information.
>
> They have everything I need information-wise, anything they don't have I can

> look it up, online, they offer free access to the Internet on the computer and interlibrary loan.

Leshaun's point made clear that information access is more vital to him than cultural reflection. This was powerful to me because it conveyed that the sense of wonder he feels in the library is a luxury, a bonus that an information portal happens to provide. This spurred questions for me related to future research opportunities that I will address in the following chapter. It also aligns with McHenry's (2002) explication of Black literary societies' focus on knowledge growth and literacy acquisition explored in Chapter 2. Leshaun is a student, focused on his academic growth, purpose-driven and using the library as a study space to complete assignments and achieve his goal. His position exemplifies that a patron's motivation plays a significant role in their library experience.

Also notable, with the exception of George who regularly browses the library for leisure after his bus ride, and April when she visits the building after paying for a ride, the library patrons interviewed in this study reported they were utilizing the library building for task completion or goal support (through attending a program, or completing a form for example) rather than for personal leisure, unless they were focused on creating memories for their children or grandchildren. Task completion was also identified by minoritized patrons as critical in an extensive PEW survey (Horrigan, 2015).

Domain 4: Proximity

April, a self-described voracious reader, put the power of proximity in perspective:

> When I lived over on Lincoln I did walk [to the library]. I was there every week, and I read so much then. One time I asked them to print out how much I read, and it was 43 pages worth of stuff in one year. I would set up my book list for the

> year. They had these things where you could mark off or put a circle around the number of the books that you wanted. And then I would go in there and they'd pull them off the shelf. And then I would take what I wanted, you know, home and what have you. And then I would take them back, you know, and I would check out more. If I could walk now, I'd probably be there every week again, probably every other day.

April doesn't have a reading goal like that now. Since she cannot walk to the library from her current residence, she and her service dog, Tony, either take a Lyft or she relies on the mobile Red-Carpet Service at the senior center she frequents. The Lyft trips usually happen, she said, for a program or when she does not want to wait two weeks for something, but not as often as she would like.

Proximity reflects how the interviewees are Relating to the library, either through geographic closeness or increasing psychological proximity. By understanding how barriers of distance and social identity both affected perception of proximity, it was necessary to reflect that proximity is relational. Both geographic closeness and psychological accessibility are key. Themes connected here include the following: Geography, Comfort and ease create willingness to claim, and Access barriers as injustice.

Theme 1: Geography

Leshaun lives closest among the interviewees and said he traverses the few blocks on foot multiple times a week. George is able to walk to a bus stop that takes him right to the library building. But the other 28 interviewees who have visited the library rely on cars or have no access but for the library's auxiliary services.

"It is not part of my world," said Mark, who lives north of Topeka. "I'm busy with other things." Juan, 37, thought similarly. He went to the library with a social program but because he does not live nearby the library and does not see it in his daily routines, it is not on his radar. For Johnathan, the routines of life do not include the library unless it is the location of a community meeting he needs to attend. Johnathan said:

> My deal is, I have such a tight travel pattern. So, even though I am more mobile, the majority of my community is not, and so I think I would go to the library far more if it was in my part of town. … I just, I really, I have probably a 3-mile radius that that I travel in in a lot of life. I think my car say my average drive is like 1.2 miles.
>
> Yeah, proximity would just help. My days are so busy, even like when they bring the bookmobile here, it's just during like office hours. So, like for a lot of people, especially in our neighborhood, are blue collar. They're working during those hours. So, they're not going to be able to access that bookmobile doing those. We have a pantry here that we operate. We have time on Tuesday mornings, Wednesday afternoon, and Thursday evenings, to try to catch everybody on the different shifts, and I wish other services that came to our neighborhood would do that.

The fact their children enjoy outings to the library means Tricia and Isaias, respectively, are planning those outings for them intentionally. Tricia said:

> I don't make it over there very much. Or my kids want to go. And I'm like, 'Okay, do I wanna get out on this Saturday to go all the way across town or not?' So, I

> think if there was one closer, the odds of 'Hey, let's go grab a book' would increase, for sure.

Isaias agreed a closer library would mean more frequent visits.

> Because it's not out of the way then, like I live on the other side of town from the library, so I feel like it would definitely be more convenient. It would be right there, no messing with the car.

Physical distance creates the need for planning, preparation, and intention. As Trica explained "Hey, let's go grab a book" is not happening when a cross-town drive is required. Even when the goal of the visit is leisure or memory-making with children or grandchildren, distance means there is a trip involved. With many demands on leisure time, and many family caretakers working more than one job, distance is a barrier.

Theme 2: Comfort and ease create willingness to claim

When asked about how a library in his neighborhood might change his library use, Johnathan shared insights I understood as connected to psychological proximity and ability to connect to and even claim the library. A branch right in the neighborhood – no matter which under-resourced neighborhood – would mean something special, Johnathan said:

> The reason we do the fireworks extravaganza here, is because people in neighborhoods like this, we're so used to having to leave to get to all the good stuff. And there's a difference in mindset when all the time to get to the good stuff you have to leave your community, rather than finding it in your community. Like, I remember they, they when I was in elementary, they would bus us to a pool, right, to learn how to swim. There's a – there's a difference when you have those resources in your neighborhood, and make you feel like they're yours. And

> if they want us to [trails off. Pauses]. When we go to my wife's family house, you know, her mom [who is white] does everything she can to try to make it comfortable. But you know what I still know? It's still not my house. And there's a difference when something is yours. When I start saying, 'This is my library. This is my space. This is my librarian, who knows me by name,' right, it's a comfort zone.

Johnathan's observation indicates that there is an opportunity to create a "comfort zone" – and sow within the community a willingness to claim a new library space as their own. Such a space that promotes and allows patrons to claim the library and librarians as their own – "my library" and "my librarian" – would reflect a sense of ownership in the library and stronger relationship to a librarian. This claiming and creating bonds can be seen as connected to the ideas Michell (2020) connects to homemade citizenship explored in Chapter 2, as markers of making oneself at home.

Theme 3: Access barriers as injustice

Jay, 40, lives in a community north of Topeka that does not have a public library. He works in an under-resourced Topeka neighborhood. He said his travel pattern has shaped his information access habits and that extends to the library.

> I normally find some other way to get, find a resource closer, because it is not necessarily easy to drive down there, and I find ways around it. But it's, we're not getting out as much because we're creatures of comfort. And so, it's not close sometimes we don't tend to think about it.

Jay has visited the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library for meetings, programs related to things he's interested in, and for art and local history exhibits in the gallery. He said each of those experiences have been positive.

> But a library is one of those things in a community that's truly free for everybody, and it's accessible to everybody that can get there. And so, to not have more than one location, especially for under resourced neighborhoods, is kind of an injustice to what it does. I mean, it's free for everybody, but if you can't get there, then you can never access it and utilize it.

Jay's framing of proximity as access justice is prescient. Amongst interviewees, those with fewer barriers to physically getting to the library, including distance and transportation access, visited most frequently. Leshaun and George are the study participants who reported the most frequent use of the library building. Both are Black, and both have low transport barriers to access through walkability and public bus. Additionally, and as demonstrated in Domain 2, elements of the library experience are unavoidably lacking from auxiliary services like Bookmobile and mobile Red-Carpet service. Nevertheless, these satellite services are perceived as important assets and valued as such because without them, many of the interviewees would have no library access at all.

That Jay was the participant to make the point also is worthy of exploration. Jay, who identifies as white and works a professional position as a community advocate, may have felt safe in making such a statement because he is something of an outsider to Topeka whose career involves challenging societal barriers through housing and neighborhood rehabilitation. Jay described access barriers as perpetuating injustice and implies a branch or co-located library facility is an opportunity to provide access that should be considerate of the most underserved.

Domain 5: Third-Place

Johnathan has thought a lot about how increasing resources to his underserved neighborhood could benefit the people who call it home and eventually trickle out to the city more broadly. It was clear the library was part of that aspirational community in the way he imagined a potential new library space:

> Especially in under resourced neighborhoods, the library should be a third place if they want people to be there. The term, if you haven't heard of that, they say your first place is normally your home. Your second place is normally work. Starbucks' whole strategy was becoming that third place. If you weren't at home, you wasn't at work, they wanted you to feel – that's why they play the music. That's why they have comfy seats. They wanted you to say, let's just go to Starbucks, and hang out there. And so, I think that's what the library should always go for. The feel of it, kind of be in that place of – if I'm just thinking of a place to go hang, you can go to the library.

The idea of the aspirational library as that third-place is an experience that participants were eager to be Imagining for the library. As parents hope for their children, and those in community work hope for their neighbors, that Imagining in itself was powerful. Thus, Imagining represents most broadly how patrons who can access the main library building are readily able to be hopeful about the library. But those who cannot access the main library are making the most of the auxiliary service they can use. It was meaningful that so many interview participants, already library patrons, had spent time thinking about their aspirational, ideal library space. Themes identified here are: A place to spend time, more would be even better, and auxiliary access is better than no access.

Theme 1: A place to spend time

In agreement with Johnathan's description of the library as a third-place, April and Maggie each mentioned how coffee and comfier seats could go a long way to making a new library space a place in which folks would want to spend a lot of time. Each of these three participants attended a different group interview, and their comments brought nods and other signs of agreement from the room each time. April added that more carpet would make some of the spaces less echo-y and thus more comfortable.

Other aspirations demonstrated participant desires to make the library space accommodating. Bonnie wants to be sure there are bilingual staff members who can assist Spanish-speaking patrons. And she hopes there will be some sort of café space, and places to sit near windows. Maggie said that offerings should be similar across all facilities to make sure access to technology and classes about computer and smart phone usage were available to more people. Craft kits, cake pans, and other specialty items could rotate between locations for variety, she suggested.

No one said that industrial-grade furniture in the library right now discourages people from sitting down with a book. But their ideas speak to their wishes—for themselves and others—to be implicitly invited to cozy up and stay, suggesting patrons would read more in the library if they could stay comfortable. Participants' responses also reflect concern for equity of service, fairness, and the variety and depth of resources that make the library so special for them.

Theme 2: More would be even better

Leshaun, who repeatedly recognized that the current library will be the easiest for him to access as long as he lives where he does now, was focused on that space when asked about enhancements.

> I think, for the space they have available, they're making the most of it. They've been doing a lot of reconstruction over the last year. They're trying to improve it. The library of Topeka closes at 6 p.m. on Saturday. Every other day it is open till 9. It would be nice if it was open till 9, 7 days a week.

April and Patti agreed with Leshaun's point about library hours. Patti grew up with a branch library in her neighborhood in California. She said the library was such a part of her childhood that she could not recall her introduction to it, but she recognized that it set her up to be a library patron in every community she has lived. She was among interviewees who had effusive praise for the quality of experience, service, material resources, and programming available at TSCPL. She also said she has experienced sight-deterioration over time and can access specialty materials from Topeka's library building and sometimes also through the senior center she frequents. Asked about what could make visits to the library more comfortable, her lengthy, specific response indicated that she had thought about this before:

> I like the idea of the café, but it's not open on the weekends. And, I don't know about everybody else, but a whole lot of people can only get there on the weekends. And they don't want crumbs all over their computers. I get it, but it means you stop what you're doing to go for a snack.
>
> Well, on Saturday they're only open until 6 p.m. I think if they could extend it to 9 that would be helpful. But I realize it's hard to get people to stay on the clock until then. You know, because they're mostly young people that they're hiring, with busy lives and they don't want to, you know, be giving up their Saturday night until 9 or 10 o'clock when they get done, you know, for whatever they're being paid. I'm sure it's not enough.

Patti's compassion for library staff was clear. As much as she likes the idea of longer hours for the library for her convenience, she did not want to unfairly burden the staff.

Isaias said he would take his children to a new library and hopes that any future space could have a mix of similar and different resources "to make people want to visit both [libraries]. Since the main one has fish, maybe there could be a bird, or turtle." Having two different libraries would only create more opportunities for his children.

Johnathan agreed that the balance of similar and unique resources will be important:

> The library has a lot of stuff in it. It has the, you know, a music studio, the podcast stuff. I just think they, they would have to have some of the digital tools, and computer stuff. I think that if they rotate some of their exhibits through the branches. I also think, if they had a branch library here, if they could do stuff in partnership with the Kansas Children's Discovery Museum, to have it have some of their exhibits here. Because, then the community could get access to both of those things that are further away in kind of one package. And it would – they could incorporate the programming with kids. So right now, I'm just like my kids are in elementary. So, so much in my life revolves around our kids right now, outside of work it's our kids. And so, the more things they have for kids, I think the more likely we'll be there. And then, like Bonnie was saying, like, even if we just don't send them by themselves, if I knew I could put them in one part of the library and do their deal, and I could go to the other part and do my deal. I probably still will go more, because that turns once again into a free family fun day for us.

> I would want them to replicate all the free passes and stuff like that that they offer at the main branch, like where you can check out the Zoo passes. Stuff like that. I would want access to those here.

The practical suggestions shared by interviewees provide an important view of what a branch or co-located library could and should provide to patrons, as well as information about what matters most to patrons about the library's physical space. Comfortable seating that encourages relaxation, bright and natural light, cozy spaces, access to coffee and the in-house café, and hours that match activity time on the weekends were all mentioned by multiple interviewees. All the interviewees who had concrete ideas for an aspirational nearer-them library have spent time in the current central library building. Those who were only able to access Bookmobile or mobile Red-Carpet Service were strikingly quiet in response to these questions.

Theme 3: Auxiliary access is better than no access

Beverly, 78, was raised in Detroit and said she first went to a branch library there in her 20s. Now, her only access to the library is every other Friday, thanks to the mobile Red-Carpet service provided to the building where she lives. She said she often checks out books during those visits and chats with the librarians during their stop. Beverly reported that she doesn't have a library card. It is likely she has a digital card that the visiting librarians utilize for her checkouts. Even on days without the Red-Carpet visit, she likes to sit in the lobby near the windows because her motorized chair makes it challenging to get outside. About the mobile Red-Carpet's mini library she said:

> It's fine. They have what I need. Two gentlemen. They bring books in, and they're very nice. It's very convenient. They come to you.
>
> I don't have no way of getting around, unless I paid somebody to take me down

there [to the library]. It's nice that they come for the elderly people who can't get out and don't have transportation.

Beverly's apartment building is about a mile and a half from the library, and yet because of her mobility scooter and the inaccessible sidewalks, even a branch a block from Beverly's building would be difficult for her to access. For Beverly, regardless of where a new library location may be located, as nearly shut-in her circumstance is unchanged. But for the mobile Red-Carpet service she would have no library access.

Beverly's "it's fine" response, and use of "gentlemen" harkens the idea of homemade citizenship (Mitchell, 2020). She appreciates what does exist and makes the most of it, even if she does not feel strong personal connection to the librarians. Her message also reinforces the ideas surfaced in the Proximity domain theme of Comfort and ease create willingness to claim. Beverly did not claim the librarians, by using their names as others in the room had, or by referring to them as "my librarian." This emphasized the personal relational connection between a patron and librarian – or patron and the library – is a connection built through interaction over time.

Library Connections

The five domains of experience expressed in the interviews became clear as explanations of participants' relational connections *with* the library. From these domains and the relational qualities they suggest between patron and library, six major findings can be drawn that directly address both research questions. These findings hold relevance for library leaders, leaders of other social infrastructure organizations, scholars, policymakers, grant-makers, and engaged patrons alike. These major findings include:

1. Geographic proximity is key to access. Those who visit the library most frequently can walk to the library or walk to a bus stop that takes them directly to the library. Those who rely on a car to access the library, live in a transportation desert, or otherwise rely on someone else to take them anywhere, out of kindness or for hire, must have a compelling reason to visit the library and plan for that visit well in advance. None of the participants who got to the library by car decided to go on a whim.
2. Wonder and awe in the library is a luxury, and arguably a privilege. The sense of wonder experienced within the library was described by many. It was a luxury, not the expectation, for patrons who are focused on goal attainment in the library.
3. Willingness to claim is a sign of psychological proximity and relating most deeply *with* the library. Those able to name a librarian, or claim the library as their own, expressed a deeper connection with the library.
4. The library as a space is important and unique. While those who utilize them highly value and appreciate the library's Bookmobile and mobile Red-Carpet Service, those auxiliary services do not replicate the sense of wonder and productive environment created within the library building. Access to the current library building also was key in participants' imagining of the ideal, aspirational library nearer to their homes. Simultaneously, many would have no access at all but for the auxiliary services, and participants believe some access is better than none.
5. Those not introduced to the public library by either family members or their elementary school found the library as adults because of a specific need. This suggests school-based fieldtrips to the library are formative experiences for many

future patrons, and that for many, school and family reinforcement of the library as a resource was meaningful. It also suggests libraries may benefit from specific programming for adults who are new guests who are very much there with purpose.

6. The library is a necessary and beneficial community asset. Many of those who cannot easily access the building wish they could more often. Among other things, the library was credited as a key part of multi-generational family progress and a crucial support for educational attainment.

These findings and the five relational connections to the library – Finding, Feeling, Using, Relating, and Imagining – surfaced from the narratives shared as well as factual or opinionated responses. The remainder of this chapter demonstrates how these findings address the dissertation's research questions. These findings provide further evidence that prioritizing equity of access in transit is the best path toward equality of outcomes across social infrastructure usability within communities (see Griffin & Sener, 2016, for example).

RQ1: Why do residents choose to engage or not with their local public library?

In brief, the library was experienced by interviewees as a community asset that provides task-completion support, a productive environment for them to work toward goals, a space that creates a sense of wonder and awe, a free place for memory-making opportunities with children and grandchildren, and access to knowledge and resources not otherwise readily available. In concert, all of these provide opportunity and space for self- and familial improvement. Those who can most easily get to the library visit most often. And participants who accessed the library building were ready and willing to imagine what their ideal library would offer. Memory-making; productive space; digital resources and technology tools; genealogy information; civic and developmental programming; and the ability to check out non-book items such as cakepans,

admission passes, and craft kits were highlighted by participants as reasons they seek out the library.

RQ2: In what ways do historical legacies of exclusion impact these choices?

Briefly, interview participants identified barriers (see Table 4.1) related to physical distance from the library, transportation access, the effects of poverty, and the lack of social or cultural knowledge of public libraires. Transportation access barriers included lack access to a personal vehicle and lack of ability to reach a bus stop. Transportation deserts were specifically mentioned as well.

The interview participants' lived experience supports what Aman and Smith-Colin (2020, p. 2) write about the importance of equitable distribution of transit routes: "Public transit that is distributed fairly is an important component of an equitable society." Access to transit is crucial to many for access to jobs, maintaining relationships, and overall quality of life (Aman & Smith-Colin, 2020; Allen, 2017).

As Allen (2017) writes in her seminal work, there are two types of transit deserts resulting in the same consequences. The first is an area "noted for a greater demand for mass public transportation than availability" and the second is a neighborhood where "people walking along streets with non-existent sidewalks, standing for long periods of time on corners with no buses in sight" (Allen, 2017, Introduction). Both types are present in Topeka, even within the same neighborhood. There are neighborhoods in Topeka where full-sized city buses cannot enter. This reality is rooted in promises made in generations past to create sidewalks and improve roads and other infrastructure as the city's boundaries grew through annexation. Those promises have gone unrealized as attention quickly shifted toward growth of more suburban areas. Consequently, lack of transportation access has and continues to contribute to the under-

resourced status of many neighborhoods in Kansas's capital city. Allen (2017) and Rothstein (2017) articulate the policy decisions behind historically disparate transit access across the United States. Among the recommendations Rothstein (2017) calls for as necessary to address intentionally designed systems of inequity that has created inequality across the U.S. is "a transportation infrastructure that makes it possible for low-income workers to get to jobs that are available" (p. 198). Library access includes the ability to use the internet and computers for job searching, resume drafting, printing, emailing, and applying for that job.

Stories for Action

In summary, five domains of experience with the public library surfaced from these group interviews. The experiences have been identified here as Introduction, Wonder, Knowledge, Proximity, and Third-Place. Each of these domains also captures a relationship of interviewees with the library: Finding, Feeling, Using, Relating, and Imagining (see Table 4.2). Within and among these connections, several key findings emerged that provide insight for librarians and others who wish to improve equity in social infrastructure. They include the following:

1. Those who visit the library most often can walk to the building or to a bus stop that provides direct access.

2. Participants focused on the library as a goal-support space for knowledge and productivity experience wonder as a luxury.

3. Participants' relationship to the library was articulated as strongest when they knew a librarian by name or imagined an ideal library as "my library."

4. Auxiliary services are valued but do not replicate the sense of wonder and productive knowledge-focused environment created within the library building, which is experienced as unique.

5. Those not introduced to the library by either family members or their elementary school found the library as adults because of a specific need.

6. The library is considered by 30 interviewees a necessary and beneficial community asset, and those who cannot easily access it wish they could more easily. One interviewee, Karla, had never visited a public library. She was new to the community and eager to go after hearing from her fellow group interviewees.

I have so far explored the purpose of this study, the relevant scholarly conversations on which this work builds, the methodological underpinnings of this community-engaged research project, and interviewees memories of, and current experiences and opinions related to the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library, as well as their hopes for a new library branch. Action steps related to the major findings shared within this chapter, and other insights gleaned from this study, are elaborated in the concluding chapter.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implications

> "The welcoming smile of my librarian
> The anticipation in my heart
> All those books — another world — just waiting
> At my fingertips."
> ~ from the poem "My First Memory (Of Librarians)" by Nikki Giovanni (2007)

The barriers to library access identified by participants in this study included physical distance from the library; transportation inaccessibility; lack of awareness of the public library; and circumstances of poverty, ranging from lack of leisure time to lack of safety out of the home. These are much more than annoyances or disadvantages. Against the backdrop of Giovanni's words, these barriers can be seen as obstacles keeping some taxpayers and their children from reaching a community resource they support – and that exists with intent to support them.

The community-engaged, qualitative study presented in these five chapters investigated a knowledge gap through participant narratives, with the goal of aiding library leaders in their daily challenge of meeting community-member needs more directly and completely. Prior chapters explained why this study was necessary, the scholarly conversations to which it contributes, how the research proceeded, and what it uncovered. This chapter explores how the knowledge gained from this study contributes to realizing the claim that "Libraries are for Everyone" (ALA Library Journal, 2018). I begin with a review of my findings, interpreting their relevance within the broader U.S. crises of racial inequality and inequity. The remaining sections of this chapter will address how scholars, practitioners (leaders of libraries and other social infrastructure organizations), policymakers, grant-makers, and engaged community residents can advance this work.

Crib Notes

The Free State history of Kansas does not mean Kansas and Kansans are free from prejudice. Topeka's position in the landmark *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* case that struck down "separate but equal" in public education means more is documented about what life there has been like than most Midwest communities of the same size (Wilson, 1995; Van Delinder, 2004; Kozol, 2005; Cheney, 2024; Velasco, et al., 2025). Included therein is a record of the overt anti-Blackness that complicated community participation for minoritized Topekans before, during, and after the *Brown* decision (Wilson, 1995; Cheney, 2024), though segregation in Topeka was never by law, only practice. Segregation of public life was socially enforced in a variety of ways by many governmental and private institutions. Jennie's experience at the Topeka Free Public Library on the state capitol grounds the day she played hooky from high school was the best evidence I have found that Topeka's library did not overtly exclude patrons by race prior to the *Brown* decision. Still, little is known about how non-white patrons felt in the earliest days of the current facility or how the closing of six school-based branches in 1942 (Ripley & Richmond, 1970) – including at Washington School, which served non-white students – affected the book access or reading habits of patrons of any age in Topeka.

In addition to the clarity Jennie's story provided to the historical record, my study indicates that in the context of the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library today the minoritized patrons interviewed do not feel overtly excluded within the public library. Recall, the first research question: Why do residents choose to engage or not with their local public library? Briefly summarized, the interviewees experienced the library as a community asset that provides task-completion support, a productive environment for them to work toward goals, a space that creates a sense of wonder and awe, a free place for memory-making opportunities with children

and grandchildren, and access to knowledge and resources not otherwise readily available. Together, these benefits provide opportunity and space for self- and familial improvement. Those who have the lowest barriers to physical access of the library visit most often. And participants who access the library building were ready and willing to imagine what their ideal library would offer. Memory-making; productive space; digital resources and technology tools; genealogy information; civic and developmental programming; and the ability to check out non-book items such as cakepans, admission passes, and craft kits were highlighted by participants as reasons they seek out the library. They shared positive or neutral experiences exclusively and expressed their access barriers are not occurring within the library. Identified barriers reflect downstream impacts of inequality including neighborhood isolation and transportation deserts.

This research nevertheless demonstrates psychological and geographic relationality are key to feelings of comfort and ease within the library, as well as willingness and ability to access the library. Recall research question two: In what ways do historical legacies of exclusion impact these choices? Briefly, interview participants identified barriers related to physical distance from the library, transportation access, the effects of poverty, and the lack of social or cultural knowledge of public libraires within their families of origin. Transportation access barriers included lack access to a personal vehicle and lack of ability to reach a bus stop. Transportation deserts were specifically mentioned as well.

U.S. society prioritizes car-based travel. As did other communities, Topeka created a public transit system that includes transportation deserts (Allen, 2017). Transportation barriers preclude full community participation (Aman & Smith-Colin, 2020). The stories shared by group interviewees participating in this study illuminated the complex interconnectedness and continuing echoes of governmental policy, socially enforced and internalized expectations, and

the prioritization of some community members at the expense of others in city planning and social infrastructure development and decision-making.

Paul Wilson's (1995) description of Topeka's geography and residential segregation during the time of the 1954 Supreme Court decision, as written in *A time to lose: Representing Kansas in Brown v. Board of Education*, is still largely true. The quadrants of the city are broadly identifiable by the race of residents today as they were in the 1950s. And economic stratification in Topeka has since increased (Van Delinder, 2004). Notably, the library's only current building, opened in 1953, sits in the southwest quadrant, which was and continues to be predominantly white.

The findings of this study make clear what happened because of post-*Brown v. Board* white flight to the suburbs was rapid, sustained input in the complex adaptive system of Topeka and broader U.S. society that exacerbated economic segregation as a proxy for race. In the wake of the *Brown* decision development resources favored suburban spaces over urban, and in Topeka prioritized expansion of new neighborhoods in outlying school attendance areas and districts over sidewalk and road improvements in longer-established urban neighborhoods. These decisions, made incrementally over decades, manifest as barriers to accessing the library today. And while I focused in this study on the community that I call home, we as Topekans are certainly not alone. These now nearly invisible barriers remain because of the stories society tells us – about merit, poverty, and the social contract, for example – that sustain anti-urban and anti-poverty bias without ever necessitating a thought of race, or the ghosts of the past (Williams, 2020; Angier, 2015; Sue et al., 2007; McIntosh, 1988).

In the present, the complex adaptive system that marks every type of minoritized community member as non-normative is again faced with sustained inputs from an executive

branch determined to erase understanding of what ails us, how it was created, how it is maintained, and why it should be undone. In this context, social infrastructure leaders – especially those at libraries – become even more crucial to preserving and advancing the reasons libraries must continue to exist and be accessible by the largest possible proportion of community members, particularly those who are faced with the most disadvantage.

For some, libraries are space for leisure and joy. For others, libraries provide crucial access to otherwise unavailable technology, resources, and space needed to achieve educational or other self-improvement goals. Based on the experiences shared in this study, those with the fewest barriers to accessing the library building are utilizing the library most. Nationally, survey research indicates those who turn to the library for task completion support and pursuit of personal growth – as opposed to leisure activity – are likely to earn less than the leisure-seekers do (Horrigan, 2015). Many of the folks who could most benefit from the library's purpose have the most difficult time reaching it because car-centric communities disadvantage those without personal transportation. This is especially true for those living in transit deserts.

My findings matter because in so many ways libraries represent the best, healthiest version of what is possible in society. Thinking for a moment about the idea of a public library, this social infrastructure asset exists as a recognition that access to knowledge can be the great equalizer. While this truism becomes harder to accept uncritically the more closely we observe social reality, the notion that there *should be* a great equalizer that prioritizes access to knowledge and information is a necessary kernel in the story of the American Dream and its implicit social contract. Without it, the myth makes no sense.

Further, libraries are a reminder that the country's most privileged have a long history of investing in the common good that should be lauded, as Andrew Carnegie did with public

libraries and other commitments to education. Still further, the existence of public libraries reminds us that there are, in fact, places remaining where we are not obligated to purchase something to have space to chase goals and there are still places that prioritize civic engagement and the ability to have constructive dialogue with those who have different points of view. Even given all the good things that public libraries do – and all the good things that they represent in our society – they are not exempt from the ills of that society, which was built upon and in support of a hierarchy that endures because of now invisible barriers that exist to ensure otherness.

No Story is Perfect: Limitations

Interviewing volunteers recruited by library partner organizations in a group setting was an effective and efficient way to meet my research goals while also honoring the agency and dignity of participants. However, participants might have been more forthcoming in one-on-one interviews or with a different researcher. In my reflective memos after the group interviews at Tyler Towers and at LULAC I noted that Jennie and Beverly, respectively, may have had much more to say that they did not share in the group setting. It is possible that had they been interviewed in an oral-history context, or one-on-one setting, by a scholar of the same race-presentation as each of them, the stories Beverly and Jennie told may have included more experiences, including those specifically tied to racial barriers.

Each interview was a group of individuals with differing social identities, race-presentations, and levels of personal familiarity among the others in the room. Depending on the interview location, participants were known to each other as colleagues, neighbors, social connections, or as classmates and teachers, or students. The personal nature of some of the questions surely made interviewees aware of those social roles and identities.

Conducting the same interview protocol with small groups of homogenous race presentation, by a researcher of the same race presentation, or in a dyad of the same race presentation could result in richer detail (Mizock & Harkins, 2012). Mizock and Harkins (2012) found that because discussion of race and racism can be experienced as uncomfortable by individuals of all races, the effect of different racial presentations within a researcher/interviewee dyad is specific to those involved. They note that white researchers who are perceived as "overly inquisitive about the minority experience" created frustration for some Black interviewees (Mizock & Harkins, 2012, p. 38). No one wants to be treated like an oddity. Further, some individuals survive indignity by choosing not to recount it, no matter who asks. The oral-history style interview could be pursued in future research. Any future study that plans to be more direct about investigation of oppression should be trauma informed.

The Next Chapter: Future Research

Race presentation can, in different circumstances, serve as a key or a lock. It is my position that it is immoral and unethical for white-presenting scholars to expect scholars of color to take on yet another burden when it comes to scholarship that helps identify and ameliorate barriers to access throughout community life. Rather, the most meaningful research and learning will come from collaboration among scholars of different social identities. Research partners who can join forces – as power-sharing coconspirators – can advance change and progress. It will take time and effort to build trust among such scholarly peers, and eventually to grow scholarly networks that center the values of progress. The following sections offer future research recommendations for scholars of all disciplines and for community-engaged scholars and their library partners.

For Scholars publishing in every LOC class

First, scholars of all social identities interested in community-advancing research should endeavor to calling for action that challenges systems that protect normative whiteness. The distinct scholarly conversations explored in Chapter 2 regarding social infrastructure makes apparent that too many scholars are forgoing the opportunity granted by their position to make specific recommendations for change. The privilege to learn obligates one to purposeful and informed action for change. Scholarship that documents historical harm is necessary so that history cannot be forgotten. However, time has marched more than seventy years since the *Brown* decision, and more than sixty years since passage of the Civil Rights Act. White-presenting scholars of the 21st Century have an obligation to catch up to peers of color who are long beyond a *look what happened* conversation. Wells and co-authors (2008) and Ratzlaff (2021) presented identified action as challenging whether the decisions made created real access, but their work was not framed in a way that could make the work of change anyone's responsibility. Wiltse (2014) linked historic harm to real-time disparity in water safety outcomes. White-presenting scholars have a responsibility to join them – and to collaborate with colleagues of color – in moving the conversation beyond the rearview mirror and toward identifiable action and change to create a more equitable future.

Not every scholar has an action orientation (Crotty, 1998; Johnson, 2017; Post, et al., 2016), but all scholars can move for moral and ethical reasons toward more "solution-oriented" investigation, analysis, and recommendations (Watts, 2017). Collaborative, solution-focused scholarship can help build new webs and systems for meaningful change. Imagine, for example, scholars of different racial identities engaging in partnership and power-sharing with community

members in an effort that combines oral history and qualitative social science to enhance placemaking, or to better identify links between past reality and current barriers.

Second, more research focused on the quality of life and community life experience of renters is needed. A growing body of research points to how sense of belonging contributes to quality of life (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Cohen, 2022), but few of these studies focus on the experience of renters. All participants in the group interview at Tyler Towers are known renters. Only one was able to walk to the bus stop that could take him directly to the library without a transfer. All other residents reported they rely on hired rides or family to take them anywhere they go. The immensity of this barrier to community participation is worthy of further investigation. Leviten-Reid and coauthors (2020) set out to understand more about renters' perceptions of community belonging, important for two reasons concerning quality of community life. First, "connection and commitment to others [in the building or neighborhood] has also been found to foster citizen participation, collective action, and civic engagement" (Leviten-Reid et al., 2020, p. 18). Second, renters are often after-thoughts if they are thought of at all "in a policy environment that privileges homeownership and fails to view investment in renters as social policy" (Leviten-Reid et al., 2020, p. 19). Among their findings: Renters who struggled to pay rent and felt unsafe also tended to report weaker sense of belonging in the community. Housing quality was not connected to reported sense of belonging.

Third, further investigation is warranted regarding how the barriers identified by participants in this study are experienced regarding other forms of social infrastructure. Participants in this study were not specifically asked about the barriers that make library access more difficult, but they mentioned 17 different barriers to access within the broad categories of physical distance from the library, transportation-related access, circumstances of poverty, and

lack of knowledge or awareness of the library by caregivers. Further research is needed regarding these barriers, and regarding what different or similar barriers are identified in relation to other forms of social infrastructure spaces, places, and assets. This would include park, pool, playground or golf-course access, for example, as well as public transportation access, among others. Of particular interest given the scholarly attention paid to perception of safety as cited in Chapter 2 could be specific investigation of how community members perceive their sense of personal safety in places they frequent, compared to places they do not visit often, or places they avoid.

For CES and their library partners

I have identified four areas of future research specific to increasing equity of library access: Auxiliary library services; Collaboration between transit organizations and other social infrastructure; More direct investigation of oppression's impact on social infrastructure experience; and Further investigation of co-cultural communication in libraries, including the messages of socio-material space, the possibility of third-culture building, and the notion that it will take messages through word and action to increase feelings of comfort, ease, and safety within the library and all social infrastructure spaces. Each of these four lines of investigations also represents an adaptive leadership challenge for library leaders interested in advancing social change.

Deeper investigation of auxiliary library services

Because Topeka has one library, resources are heavily concentrated in one building and the staff that bring to life the plethora of activity are almost all there. Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library offers book lockers, delivery at work, home delivery for those who are shut-in, as well as Bookmobiles – specially outfitted buses with shelving and a desk for the librarian when

the bus is parked – and the mobile Red-Carpet service detailed in Chapter 4. These auxiliary services are examples of the library's commitment to reaching as many residents as possible despite having only one location. What does Topeka have to contribute to the conversation underway about the merits and flaws of auxiliary services? How might the insights shared in these interviews make those auxiliary offerings stronger? Is it possible, for example, for the Bookmobile to collaborate with a nearby business or non-profit to provide the opportunity for co-working style knowledge-focused space during the Bookmobile's regular stops?

Transit collaboration with other social infrastructure

Topeka's Metro Area Transit Agency is about to kick-off its annual summer-long Kids Ride Free program. Public high school students in Topeka can ride the city bus free with their student ID during the school year. But middle schoolers do not have that ride-free opportunity until summertime. One research question worthy of investigation in my community is what happens to library visits during the summer *because* of the free bus access? It is likely that summer library visits include more children because they are not in school. But what can we learn about how many of them are taking the bus, with or without their grownups? What opportunities exist for researching collaborations between transit and other social infrastructure? What options are possible related to bus passes for library use? What Transit + Library collaborations exist now in other communities?

More direct investigation of oppression's impact on social infrastructure experience

As mentioned earlier, no participant in this study was asked directly about how they perceive their race or other social identities affects their ability to access the library. Nor were they asked directly about the barriers they face in pursuit of the library. Still, 17 different examples of barriers were expressed by interviewees. What could be learned if more direct

questions were asked of patrons, and non-patrons alike? Iris Marion Young's Five Faces of Oppression (1990) – Exploitation, Marginalization, Powerlessness, Cultural Imperialism, and Violence – could be considered as a guide for question development in exploring, for example, transit access or more specific aspects of the library experience. However, work like this could not be done haphazardly. Pointed questions related to the experience of racism, and therefore experiences of race-based stress and trauma, especially, should never be considered casual.

Perceptions of safety within social infrastructure should be explored. Consider as example the anecdotal prevalence in Topeka of people who talk about public transit as unsafe even if they have never ridden a bus in this community or any other. Such unfounded perception represents more than a marketing problem. It relates to willingness to invest public funds in transit access, route enhancements, and the like (Transit Center, 2021).

Further investigation of co-cultural communication and libraries

The findings of this study did not suggest that the Topeka library's communicated messages alienated or suppressed participants based on normative whiteness, as co-cultural communication might have predicted. However, this lack of findings does not repudiate co-cultural theory. I suggest instead that questions be approached differently, potentially offering an extension of co-cultural communication theory. There are two paths of inquiry I see that allow for that deeper exploration of co-cultural communication theory and libraries specifically: The messages of space and place; and the possibility of "third-culture building" (Orbe & Harris, 2015) within the library. This may also resonate with leaders of other social infrastructure organizations.

One area of interest is exploration of the messages conveyed through space and place. I think of this as way to understand the words and actions – discourse and activity –

communicated by social infrastructure leaders and staff through the space and organizational culture within the library. It is my contention that those messages – the discourse and activity consistently expressed and perceived by patrons – contributes significantly to a patron's comfort, ease and sense of safety within the space of the library. This is a theory-building research opportunity that potentially advances co-cultural communication to include socio-material space and creates an opportunity to give the work of creating ease for patrons to the institution itself.

Another research thread that would advance the understanding of co-cultural communication within the library context is to investigate in what way the social identities of librarians and patrons contribute to communicative understanding. For example, is representation enough to enable a level of "third-culture building" – or creating a shared communication culture – between patrons and the library? In particular, the phases of the third-culture building process include actions such as awareness, and appreciation that there is not a universal experience, curiosity, and reciprocity as a means of mutual benefit, and eventually "co-created roles, norms and mores" emerge (Orbe & Harris, 2015, p. 152). Content analysis of library e-newsletters may also contribute to understanding of the third-culture building process.

The remainder of this chapter will outline possible action based on the implications of this research. It is important to recognize the tension that comes from knowing the best time to start doing the work of eliminating access barriers was generations ago. We cannot change what did not happen then. But we can start at the second-best time: Today.

The Next Book: Future Actions

Words are nice, but action is required to build trust and make change for the better. I offer here recommended actions for practitioners, policymakers, and concerned citizens.

For Practitioners

For library leaders, there are four immediate calls for action that come from this study's findings. First, a primary adaptive challenge facing library leaders is transportation access within their communities. Second, measuring circulation checkouts does not reflect a patron's relationship with the library, but Net Promoter Score may. Third, the imagined aspirational library conjured by participants in this study is cozier and encourages longer, leisurely visits while supporting task- and goal-completion. Fourth, proximity to the library is paramount to access.

Library + Transit collaboration is crucial

How best can libraries and transit agencies partner to increase library access for all community residents? If library directors and transit system directors begin relationship-building and collaborating from industry to local levels, what innovations and opportunities may be realized? Many participants in this study said they wanted to be able to visit the library building more often, but transportation was a barrier. Specific to Topeka, relatively new micro-transit efforts are increasing access to large employers for residents of neighborhoods with limited or no fixed route bus access. However, as currently designed the zoned system does not include library access (AECOM, 2022). Today there are 12 fixed transit routes in Topeka. Two of those routes include a stop at the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library and the library is recognized as a key destination on both routes (AECOM, 2022). The other 10 routes would require a transfer in order to access the library.

What gets measured gets attention

Johnathan's recollections of the Lancaster-Kiest Branch Library in Dallas he rode the bus to made me want to learn more. Surely the neighborhood branch Johnathan described has

changed in the nearly 30 years since the memories shared were made, but Dallas Public Library described the branch's service area in its 2024-2028 strategic plan as 100 percent Black (26 percent) and Latino (74 percent), with about 18.5 percent of service area residents identified as library customers. The summary data shared publicly was based on the metric of library checkouts (Dallas Public Library, 2023).

What struck me about this was none of Johnathan's recollections of his neighborhood branch were about what he checked out. They were about how he felt in the library and what the library enabled him to do. It will be no surprise to a librarian that data demonstrate that libraries are experiencing a dramatic shift in checkouts (IMLS, 2024b; ALA, 2024). Libraries deserve a metric that can keep up with the evolution underway and focuses more on connections and perceptions than transaction. Once such option might be Net Promoter Score, which is used everywhere from retail to tourism destinations like museums (Pekarik et al., 2018) to municipalities. Topeka is among many medium to large cities nationally using Net Promoter Score (NPS) as a proxy measurement for community pride and sense of quality of life among residents, and of enthusiasm for the community among visitors (Lately & Saldanha-Olson, 2025).

NPS was originally proposed in 2003 by Fred Reichheld as a way for organizations to measure how well they treat customers and thereby generate customer "relationships worthy of loyalty" (Reichheld, 2011, p. 1). Essentially, NPS asks one question of those with a recent customer experience: *On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 = Not at all and 10 = Definitely, please rate your willingness to recommend us* (this service, this product, this experience) *to others* (friends and family, coworkers, etc. depending on context).

NPS identifies Promoters as those who respond to that question with a 9 or 10. “They are loyal and enthusiastic.” Those who respond with a 7 or 8 are Passives, “satisfied, but unenthusiastic.” Those who respond with a 0-6 are Detractors. “They are unhappy customers … and specifically do not recommend you to others” (Garrity, 2010, p. 30). In the same way NPS Promotors share positive word of mouth about a business they frequent, those who feel positive about a place they visit are likely to share that, as are those who feel especially unwelcome. NPS is not without its critics (Fisher & Kordupleski, 2019; Huber, 2011; Rocks, 2016). Rocks (2016), for example, points out that the adoption of NPS has rapidly outpaced research on its statistical properties.

Cozy, engaging spaces

Interviewees were quick to suggest that more coffee-shop style couches in the library would be ideal. Topeka’s library has lots of strategically placed colorful furniture that clearly is made to withstand some wear and tear. Research participants said the industrial furniture is a bit too stiff to convey they should stay a while and read. Pilot-testing some softer couches that give a living room appearance rather than a waiting room might go far toward reducing psychological distance for patrons.

Making coffee available on the weekends and in the evenings was suggested in always understanding tones, as was the aspiration that Saturday night hours could match those of every other night. What might a library innovate if it were open late on Saturdays? Book clubs and craft and chat circles for night owls does not seem far-fetched for a library as creative as Topeka’s.

Proximity is paramount

As consideration of a new library space progresses – as a new branch location or a co-located branch – interviewees surfaced several worthwhile considerations. Among them: Walkability should be prioritized, and a location chosen that would enable those within a transportation desert to still be able to reach the library. The prevailing hope was the new space have enough in common with the current space to create opportunity for memory-making and "Library Joy" (Threets, 2025) in both libraries.

Balancing those insights with available space may not be easy but will be worthwhile for those who will make the most of the library. Productive space, for goal-attainment activity, and task completion support should also be prioritized, along with collaboration space, and staff members who reflect the community are all things interviewees brought up that could make that aspirational library a place they want to visit. Each of those things contributes to psychological proximity, as would consistently offered library orientation tours. A monthly tour would benefit new residents as well as long-time Topekans who find the library as adults.

I have the pleasure of knowing many librarians by name, and each of them seems to regularly dream up ways to make the library even better. I hope these ideas are received with the kindness with which they are offered. None of the interviewees was upset with what does not already exist. Rather, they hope alongside librarians that a new space reaches its full potential for the community.

For Policymakers, Grant-makers, and Concerned Citizens

For policymakers, grant-makers, and concerned citizens I offer three compelling implications from this research: School Fieldtrips as crucial opportunities; Librarians need us, too; and Library auxiliary services are great, but not the same.

Field trips are formative

Interview participants made clear that being in the library on a field trip – and with their family members – as children made a difference for them. Surely library leaders already know the value of library fieldtrips. One of the children's librarians at Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library focuses on coordination with schools, as example. In Topeka, public library field trips often brought multiple schools through the building on the same day before the COVID-19 pandemic. But more recently, field trips have decreased due to budget cuts and driver shortages for transportation. Requests for librarians to visit schools have increased as field trip occurrence has decreased (M. Pyko, personal communication, May 2, 2025). If current trends continue, there could be deleterious consequences for future library access. Therefore, funders, policymakers, and concerned citizens must be aware of the challenge at hand.

Librarians need us, too

Historically and recently, libraries and librarians have been targets of politically motivated censorship campaigns, rooted in exclusion or denial of non-normative community members. Current targets include suspected communist authors to children's books featuring multi-racial or LGBTQIA2S+ families. These efforts demonstrate a recognition of libraries as knowledge brokers and cultural influencers (Mehra & Jaber, 2023; Mipro, 2023; Wiegand, 2020; Wiegand & Wiegand, 2018). As example, I am writing this days after the Librarian of Congress was summarily dismissed (Green, 2025) and the White House press secretary suggested it was because she had allowed "inappropriate books in the library for children," though the Library of Congress has nothing to do with children's book access (Green, 2025). Recent public input sessions about the library's budget in Topeka included comment about the filth available on the library's shelves.

In short, this is a difficult time to be a librarian. It is also a challenging time to be an organizational steward focused on enhancing access to services that increase critical thinking, knowledge acquisition, and skill development of all kinds. In such times, being a patron – and even contributing to the public library's foundation – can be an active stand for the work and purpose of the library.

Auxiliary services are crucial, and not the same

Policymakers hesitant to invest in equity-minded expansion of services should consider the lesson of this research regarding library auxiliary service. For participants who could not access the library building, the auxiliary service they could access was a crucial service. That service is distinct from the library building and focused on filling access gaps related to physical material checkouts. This is necessary. Also necessary is finding ways to increase access to the library building itself, where the experience includes a sense of wonder, knowledge-focused space for working, and participation in programing for civic life. It is worthwhile to consider how to preserve material access provided by auxiliary services and increasing access to the library building itself. We must ask ourselves as a society if we are comfortable accepting that some of us get what amounts to second-class service. For generations such a system was intentional across the country. Today we know better and thereby have a responsibility to do better.

This study raised awareness that a public library's auxiliary efforts to reach seniors, shut-ins, and those unable to get to the central library are valued by community members and crucial for access to materials. It is important to recognize the experience provided is distinct from the library building and both experiences are worthwhile. This research demonstrates if the means and will to establish a new library exists, that new library will be utilized. If the new library

evokes that sense of Library Joy and wonder and includes space for memory-making, and skill-building, it is likely that it will not dramatically siphon visitors from the main library. Patrons who can do so will enjoy both locations, but they will visit the one closest to home more often.

As my community and so many others grapple with the challenges of library facilities – from deferred maintenance projects to construction of a branch or creation of a co-located facility – I was drawn to the philanthropic proliferation of public libraries across the United States, thanks to Andrew Carnegie. A library-building moonshot to rival Carnegie's investment of late 19th and early 20th Centuries is not unwarranted today. To put that past investment in perspective, Andrew Carnegie granted the funds for the construction of 64 libraries in Kansas. Some are on university campuses, most are in rural communities (Carnegie Corp., 2025b). Carnegie clearly understood the connection between proximity to the library and ability to access it. He believed so strongly in the need for branch libraries within walking distance of one's residence that he wrote in the *New York Sun* in 1895 (Carnegie Corp., 2025a): "The name 'Public Library' will be a misnomer unless the trustees broaden their scheme and connect the central library with these branches." In 1901 he granted funds to front the construction of 65 library branches in New York City. Today the New York Public Library system is the largest library system in the United States, operating 88 neighborhood branches and four research centers across the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island (Carnegie Corp, 2025a; NYPL.org, 2025). Once they were built, Carnegie left administration of the libraries to the communities that operated them, which means some of the libraries he paid to build were segregated libraries – by law or tradition.

While communities like mine cannot sit on their hands and wait for a philanthropist, the value of common good investment in libraries should be clear – to those who believe in

resources that support self-improvement, family improvement, and joy without purchase. Participants in this research suggest that any future library branch location should consider neighborhood walkability. Bringing a library branch into a transportation desert that is walkable solves one problem if not the whole regarding access to community participation.

For the Love of Libraries, Democracy, and Justice

Barriers keeping residents from accessing the public library were not created by accident. They result in more than barriers to a front door. They are barriers to knowledge, self- and familial improvement, opportunity, and even joy. Although those barriers were not expressed by interview participants as related to race, those barriers – including safety, transportation access, limited leisure time, and more – are perpetuated through systems that create expectations and experiences that prioritize white normativity. To protect democratic ideals – and to eventually realize them – those access barriers must be targeted for purposeful action and elimination.

Simultaneously, as life in the Jim Crow Era, regardless of geography within the United States, is fading from lived memory the current presidential administration is targeting that history for purge from museums and public consciousness through executive order. These actions arguably support a return to *de facto* segregation by both race and gender identities. Orders to eliminate protections for gender identity and roll back efforts to increase diversity of the federal workforce and the workforces of federal contractors at every level were among the first signed, on January 20, and January 21, 2025, respectively. Responding to those orders, a public memo issued by the General Services Administration (GSA, 2025) repeals clause 52.221 of the Federal Acquisition Regulation, which required any company receiving federal contracts to maintain a desegregated workforce and desegregated facilities. Executive orders have also targeted the interpretation of history in federally affiliated museums and slashed the workforce

and federal funding supporting the Institute of Museum and Library Services and its research and grantmaking to museums and libraries across the country. These orders are under legal challenge (ALA, 2025; White House, 2025c and 2025d).

Changing centuries of societal expectations and behaviors is no small task. But social infrastructure leaders who approach the challenge as an adaptive leadership one can communicate with intention and begin to send messages that increase comfort and ease in the library among minoritized patrons. Increasing the number of library locations within communities will be a meaningful message indeed. Library funding – and citywide resources for social infrastructure expansion that also includes public transit – will be necessary.

Librarians cannot do it alone.

Adaptive leadership argues that change processes focus on progress. Because public space is inherently social (Whyte, 1980; Whyte, 2009), the challenges library leaders are facing now are likely to multiply as efforts to provide access to broad ranges of authors, publications, points of view, and ideas receive ever-increasing scrutiny. With this crucial context of real-time tumult and pressure surrounding community life and social infrastructure organizations and civic institutions of all kinds, it is necessary to remember that the goals of a just society are worthy ones. Worthy of our collective and individual time, toil, and treasure.

This study shows that barriers are preventing some library users from fully realizing "Library Joy" (Threets, 2025) and from building relationships strong enough to lead to willingness to claim. This work also adds evidence that experiencing the public library's unique space is a phenomenon. The library is a place for self-improvement, for memory-making, for task completion – from tax-filing to job-hunting. It is a place to share thoughts, to ask questions,

to find answers, and sometimes, to cozy up with a book or share time with a friend over coffee. Working to eliminate access barriers is a way to show all of those things are worthwhile.

Each of us – library leaders and librarians, government officials, engaged community residents, and scholars alike – has a role in the work to ensure every community resident has the access and the ability to become a public library patron. And that every patron, regardless of their social identities, is able to find their own "Library Joy" (Threets, 2025), and to feel enough comfort and ease within the library they are willing and able to build a relationship with it. Eventually, may each patron's library relationship grow rich enough that we can all seize the opportunity, as Nikki Giovanni (2007) wrote, to recognize on every visit: "The welcoming smile of my librarian."

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Appendix A - IRB Approval Letter

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Office of Research Integrity, Compliance and Security

TO: Colene Lind
AQ Miller School of Media and Communication
Manhattan, KS 66506

Proposal Number: IRB-12423

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 10/23/2024

RE: Proposal Entitled, "A place for all? Narrative inquiry exploring how legacies of exclusion impact library engagement/
Leadership Communication PhD dissertation."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects / Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Kansas State University has reviewed the proposal identified above and has determined that it is EXEMPT from further IRB review. This exemption applies only to the proposal - as written – and currently on file with the IRB. Any change potentially affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation and may disqualify the proposal from exemption.

Based upon information provided to the IRB, this activity is exempt under the criteria set forth in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, **45 CFR §104(d), category:Exempt Category 2 Subsection ii.**

Certain research is exempt from the requirements of HHS/OHRP regulations. A determination that research is exempt does not imply that investigators have no ethical responsibilities to subjects in such research; it means only that the regulatory requirements related to IRB review, informed consent, and assurance of compliance do not apply to the research.

Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, the University Research Compliance Office, and if the subjects are KSU students, to the Director of the Student Health Center.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 10/23/2024 1:47 PM ET

203 Fairchild Hall, 1601 Vattier St., Manhattan, KS 66506 | 785-532-3224 | fax: 785-532-3278 | comply@k-state.edu

Appendix B - Participant Biographical Information Form

Self-reported participant biographical information:

__ Use my first name in publication (No last names will be used).

__ I prefer to have a pseudonym in publication. Please call me _____

My age today is _____

My race is _____

I have lived in Topeka since (approximate is OK. This will be used to describe you as a community member.)

_____

Check the box that best describes you:

____ I have a Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library card and I'm sure it's active because I have used it in the last year. I last visited the library approximately: _____

____ I have a Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library card but I'm not sure if it is active.

____ I don't have a Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library card, but I have before.

____ I have never had a Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library card.

Follow-up communication:

___ I'm willing to answer follow-up questions. Please contact me this way:

Phone: _____

E-mail: _____

Mailing address: _____

___ Please do not contact me with follow-up questions.

Participate in presentation opportunities:

____ I would like to be contacted about potential publication or presentation opportunities related to this research.

____ Please do not contact me about potential publication or presentation opportunities related to this research.

Appendix C - Semi structured interview guide & debriefing statement

Opening statement:
Thank you so much for participating in this group interview today. As a reminder, you may decide not to answer a question or completely excuse yourself from this process at any time with no consequence other than not contributing to this research endeavor.

Introductions: Tell us your name and why you decided to participate today.

What do you remember about the first time you visited a library? Tell me the story.
What do you remember about the most recent time you visited a library? Tell me the story.

What do you remember about your family of origin's library-related habits? Did you visit together? How was the library thought of and talked about as you were growing up?
Is that similar or different than you think of the library now? How so? Why do you think that is?

When you visit the library now, what are you most likely visiting for? A program? Something to check out? Is anyone often with you?

If you aren't a regular library visitor, what do you think is keeping you away?

Does the library reflect you, your interests, and needs? What makes you feel that way?

What changes would make you want to visit the library more often?

Are you confident in your understanding of what the library offers? If yes, what services do you use most? If no, how should the library share information about its offerings?

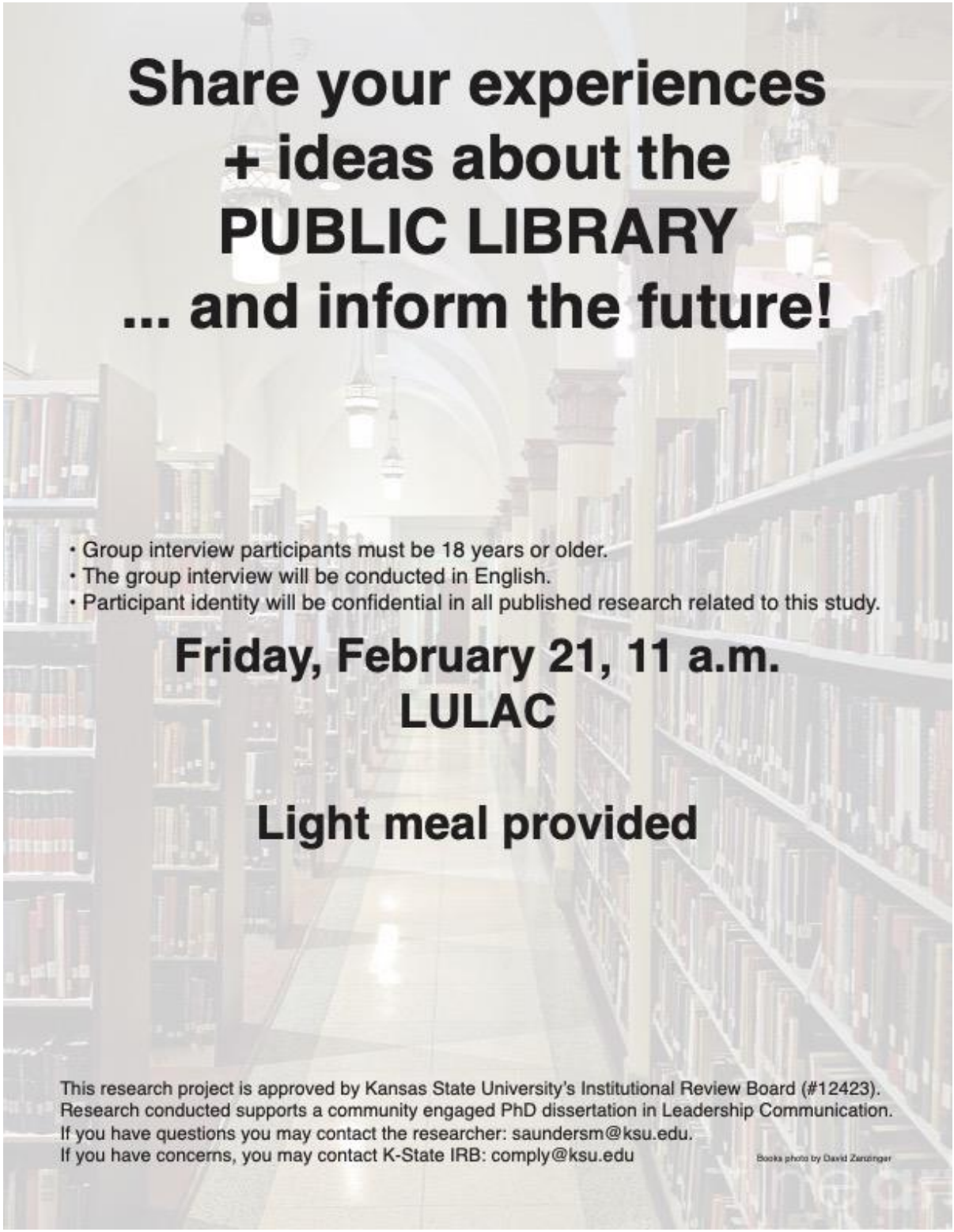
How would a branch library closer to your home change your use of the library?

What would make a library branch closer to your home feel most comfortable for you? What would make it a place that you visit monthly, weekly, or more?

What else should I know about your experience with the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library specifically, or with libraries generally before we leave today?

Debriefing statement:
That is the conclusion of our group interview. If you wish to receive a summary of results from all the group interviews, I will provide to you a one-page summary in non-technical language as soon as summary findings are prepared. I will contact you in the way you indicated on your biographical form. Additionally, if you want to be informed about publication and potential presentation opportunities you will hear from me again. Finally, you may contact the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board and the Office of Research Compliance at comply@k-state.edu or 785.532.3224.
Thank you.

Appendix D - Sample Recruitment Poster



Appendix E - From Racism to Recognition in U.S. Librarianship

Mehra & Grey (2020, p. 197) describe the Library and Information Science (LIS) profession with a critique of the "White-IST" (white + elitist) normative expectations baked into the profession and the delivery of library service:

> The White-IST concept in American libraries can be traced to their roots during the pre-nineteenth century and the values emoted in their founding documents of truths that were self-evident in the equality of men, at the exclusion of women and nonwhite persons, especially the enslaved and [I]ndigenous populations. … Literacy, reading, and books were not a right for all citizens. Class distinctions also excluded racial groups in access to both literacy and funds. The access paradigm contributes to White-IST notions in reflecting an elitist standard of the dissemination of books for those who are both privileged and among the white citizenry. This foundational policy reverberates in the evolutionary development of discriminatory practices based on the idea of the lesser races and unfortunate poor.

This plants the seeds of poison fruit as systemic oppression manifests through paternalism, respectability policing, racism, sexism, and classism among them, and restricts access, is wholly pervasive and exclusionary, and its cumulative effects continue (Adams et al., 2016). While libraries are only one part of a community's public sphere and social infrastructure, the structure of the library as a profession, as a service, and as a place, allows it to be considered independently of other community institutions.

Mehra & Grey (2020, p. 192) also identified "six normative White-IST phases in LIS." These non-linear, non-timebound phases are "racism in library history, White-IST information

research, exclusion in LIS education, lip service of LIS diversity (self-deception), tokenism and limited inclusion in LIS, and retribution and reconciliation." Related to these identified phases, consider these milestones of the profession as markers of connected discourse and evidence of systemic oppression that weakens the social fabric of non-white community participation:

1873: Kansas City, Missouri opens its first library, inside a school. Libraries continue to be opened inside schools, making them socially segregated based on school district policy. The library does not have a policy about access according to race (Roe & Reeves, 2024).

1876: American Library Association forms as the professional association (Chancellor, 2019).

1900: Edward Christopher Williams is the first African American to graduate from library school in the U.S. He attended New York State Library School and in 1904 became the first African American library school faculty member (Wheeler & Smith, 2018).

1925: ALA endorses a plan to start a librarianship education program at The Hampton Institute, an Historically Black College/University (HBCU). The school closes in 1938 due to lack of funding. (Wheeler & Smith, 2018).

1936: The national conference of the ALA in Richmond invites Black librarians, but they are not allowed to participate in the sessions that included meals because they were not legally allowed to dine with whites "thereby diminishing their capacity to fully take part in the conference" (Chancellor, 2019, p. 50).

1939: ALA adopts its first "Library Bill of Rights." It did not take a stand on library segregation (Mathiesen, 2015). Two months later, 5 young African Americans staged the first public library sit-in, in protest of segregated library service, in Alexandria, VA. (ALA, 2018).

1941: North Carolina Central University begins library education program. It is now the only HBCU with an ALA-accredited Master of LIS program. It first earned accreditation in 1975 (Wheeler & Smith, 2018).

1953: Houston, Texas closes the one library branch for non-whites, replacing it with bookmobile service. When branch libraries were constructed in Houston throughout the 1960s, only one is built in a predominantly Black neighborhood (Knott Malone, 2007).

1960: Greenville, South Carolina closes its library for whites and its separate library for non-whites, rather than risk court-ordered desegregation after a lawsuit is filed on behalf of Black students arrested for disorderly conduct for reading silently in the library's whites-only branch. The library system reopens only the primary branch 17 days later in response to public pressure from within the community, effectively desegregating. Greenville was the first library system in South Carolina to desegregate because of public demonstrations. Two other communities desegrated earlier without citizen action (Wiegand, 2017).

1961: The "Tougaloo Nine" protest the segregated library in Jackson, Mississippi, by asking for a book at the reference desk that is known to be unavailable at the separate library for non-whites. A crowd gathers at the courthouse when the arrested students arrive. The crowd encounters police-inflicted violence including broken bones and at least one dog bite (Wiegand, 2017).

1964: ALA takes its first decisive action to ensure all state associations welcomed members of all races. (Josey & Abdullahi, 2002).

1970: Conversations begin within ALA about minority recruitment into the profession (Josey & Abdullahi, 2002).

1972: ALA hires its first non-white executive director "because there were some liberals on the search committee" (Josey & Abdullahi, 2002 p. 14)

1990: The ALA issues a "Policy on Library Services to Poor People," which offers 14 actions the ALA will take as it "promotes equal access to information for all persons, and recognizes the urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America" (ALA, 1990)

1997: The ALA begins its Spectrum Scholarship Program specifically to increase the number of racial and ethnic minorities attending graduate library schools (Josey & Abdullahi, 2002). Mentorship within the profession for non-white librarians remains a persistent challenge 20 years on (Wheeler & Smith, 2018).

2007: Mehra and Sirnivasan propose the Library Community Convergence Framework of proactive community action (Mehra & Sirnivasan, 2007).

2010: Pateman and Vincent (based in the UK) publish book: *Public Libraries and Social Justice*.

2015: Mathiesen proposes a framework for social justice in LIS focused on "informational justice" (Mathiesen, 2015).

2016: Dr. Carla Hayden is appointed Librarian of Congress, making her the first Black woman to hold the post. (Wheeler & Smith, 2018).

2018: ALA passes a "Resolution to Honor African Americans Who Fought Library Segregation" This action recognized "hundreds of young public library protestors" who took courageous, nonviolent action in the 1940s through 1960s to advocate for access to libraries by African Americans and others discriminated against in the Jim Crow Era (ALA, 2018).

2019: ALA and the Association of Research Libraries begin collaboration on development of a Cultural Proficiency and Racial Equity Framework (ALA, 2022).

2020: Libraries respond to COVID-19 pandemic (ALA, 2020)

Public Library Association launches grant funding to increase engagement by Latinx parents (PLA, 2020)

2022: ALA adopts its Cultural Proficiency and Racial Equity Framework (ALA, 2022)

PLA updates strategic goals, putting equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice at its center (PLA, 2022).

March 2025: Executive order calls for elimination of the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (White House, 2025c).

May 2025: Dr. Carla Hayden is dismissed as Librarian of Congress, amidst executive branch opposition to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (Green, 2025).