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The relational dimension of librarianship

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Abstract

Introduction. As libraries increasingly are used as civic spaces, places for participation and community building, the implications for librarians need further consideration. This paper presents the concept relational librarianship, intended to provide a novel perspective on librarians' relational role.

Method. The paper presents and discusses scholarly work from library and information science (LIS) and introduces *relational competence* as a relevant perspective on librarianship.

Analysis. The analysis pays particular attention to how relational competence adds to librarianship and the competences and skills needed today.

Results. By embedding relational competence into professional training and practice, librarians can more effectively support social cohesion and community building. This perspective shifts the focus from individual interactions to the broader impact of librarians as facilitators of trust and inclusion within diverse communities.

Conclusion. *Relational librarianship* is a new concept that could prove fruitful for researchers, in practical librarianship and for LIS programmes, as it aligns the profession with the growing demand for social connection and inclusivity.

Introduction

Loneliness has recently been declared a global health threat by the World Health Organization (WHO), which launched the WHO Commission on Social Connection to address its impact on health and societal trust. As communities face these challenges, the necessity for a coordinated response has become evident. Libraries, often viewed as community hubs, present a significant opportunity to foster social connection, as highlighted in Library and Information Science (LIS) research (see for example Audunson et al., 2019).

This paper investigates the evolving role of libraries as platforms for social connectedness, focusing on the implications for librarians. Professionals and scholars have for some time raised the issue of skills and competencies within librarianship. Mary Ghikas of the American Library Association encouraged librarians to *turn outward* (2019), to support belonging and co-creation in local communities. Lankes et al. (2015) expanded discussions on skills needed by library and museum professionals in a participatory culture. They refer to librarians as potential ‘*positive change agents*’ (2016) in their communities. Research also indicates that librarians observe the need for increased competence pertaining to the social processes they initiate with increased programming and outreach – perhaps especially to youth and marginalised groups, such as immigrants, (Johnston, Pálsdóttir, et al., 2022). Thus, the role of librarians needs to be related to building trust and relations both within the library, and the community.

The link between interpersonal trust, participation, social capital and democracy is evident through scholarly work in different research areas (see for example Sullivan and Transue, 1999), including library and information science, where researchers have explored how libraries help foster such qualities. These concepts are also relevant to discuss in relation to the *social turn* of public libraries, which repositions libraries as enablers of interpersonal social processes (Nolin and Söderholm 2015). Nolin and Söderholm add that it entails ‘*a turn in how library issues are framed: from a societal perspective to a social perspective, from the building of society to the building of relations*’ (p. 244). Both public library practice and research have sought to discover how libraries contribute to community-building activities, which in turn can foster social and democratic sustainability (see for example Audunson et al., 2019). The rise of participatory culture and processes in libraries adds to these developments (Nguyen et al., 2012; Johnson, 2016; Rasmussen, 2016).

The catchphrase *from collection to connection* (Audunson and Aabø, 2013) reflects how the focus has shifted from the library collection to the social processes it enables. Libraries’ role as facilitators of community interactions is further emphasised by Johnston, Jochumsen and Edquist (2022). However, central to this development is the librarians’ responsibility for initiating and maintaining social processes within the library and broader community. To develop our understanding of how librarians contribute to fostering deeper, more meaningful, relationships and building trust within communities, I introduce the term *relational competence* and discuss its potential relevance for librarianship. I argue that we need to expand our vocabulary in terms of librarians’ contribution to community building, and how we can move towards *relational librarianship*. This concept, I believe can highlight the pivotal role librarians play in nurturing and maintaining libraries as central hubs of community building, especially in diverse communities.

The paper is guided by the following research questions:

- How has the evolving role of libraries in community building increased the need for different skills and competencies among librarians?
- How can we understand relational competence, and what role can it play in librarianship?
- To what extent does relational competence have a role in LIS education?

This paper is structured as follows: First, it clarifies key concepts and considers how the role of libraries – particularly public libraries – has evolved in recent years, and how librarians are increasingly faced with added responsibilities regarding social engagement and community support. Perspectives on librarians' skills and competencies are presented, as well as a reflection on our understanding of what librarianship entails. Second, I propose a consideration of relational competence as part of librarians' proficiency. The concept is presented and discussed, more specifically related to community engagement and fostering relationships. The final part of the paper includes a discussion of *relational competence* in terms of librarianship and LIS education that takes its basis in Lankes' (2020) article 'Never neutral never alone', in which he argues that there is a need to reconsider the elements in LIS education programmes. The paper's aim is to establish a preliminary conceptualisation of relational librarianship and broaden our understanding of how fostering connections can be a goal-oriented approach for librarians to engage in community building.

Definitions and clarifications: community, diversity and relational competence

The following paragraphs specify three interrelated concepts used in this paper, namely community, diversity and relational competence. They are central aspects to the social turn of libraries, describing the context (community), one of the key aspects of communities (diversity), as well as one possible approach for librarians (relational competence).

The term community stems from the Latin *communitas*, meaning the same. *Communitas* in turn comes from *communis*, meaning 'shared by many' (Sullivan, 2009). Whether it is a neighbourhood, an organisation or a university, a community consists of people who *share* something, for example geography, interests, values, beliefs, practices or responsibilities. What the commonality is matters less than its presence. As Lankes stresses (2016), community is central to librarianship, as all librarians work within a community and provide services to community members.

When hearing the word community, we might associate it with kinship and social bonds. However, the degree to which people have strong bonds between them in a community varies. Scott (2011) looks at community in three ways: 'communities of interest', 'spatial communities' (Linley and Usherwood, 1998) and 'communities of relationships'. She points out that while public libraries are well-known for contributing to building communities of interest, their potential of building relational communities and spatial communities are not fully reached. Johnston et al. (2022) consider that communities can have affective elements, meaning that people care about each other, and that libraries are among the institutions where affective ties can be formed. In this paper, I will look more closely at how librarians can contribute to relational communities.

In the introductory paragraph, I refer to *diverse communities*. Diversity – or the support for diversity – generally refers to the inclusion of traditionally marginalised groups. It 'involves acknowledging, respecting, and appreciating the differences that people have in terms of their appearance, beliefs, and lifestyle' (Sullivan, 2009). Furthermore, there are primary and secondary dimensions of diversity, primary dimensions being those that are unchangeable, like ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental abilities and so on. Secondary dimensions are changeable, and include socioeconomic factors, religion and relationship status. The more primary diversity dimensions are present, the harder it can be to establish trust (Sullivan, 2009). However, heterogeneous communities benefit because diversity fosters (1) the reduction of prejudice, (2) the vitality of groups by providing new perspectives, (3) productivity by providing a wider range of resources, (4) creative problem solving, and (5) perspective taking.

Hence, diversity – and certainly diverse communities – represents an area of which all librarians should be aware, especially public librarians, who are tasked with facilitating services for a broader

spectrum of users. Library services and programming directed towards marginalised groups are well-known, for example those targeting immigrant and newcomer communities (see for example Hoyer, 2013; Johnston, 2018; Johnston et al., 2024). However, there are other groups who have remained largely unacknowledged or invisible, such as those identifying as part of the queer community, or people with different disabilities. Building relationships with community members and different groups in the community is something librarians have always done, but as loneliness increases (Berlingieri et al., 2023; World Health Organization, 2023), and inclusion and participation become increasingly important, there is a need for developing these skills, both within the field of librarianship and within LIS education. As Johnston et al note: *'The social fabric of a community is shaped by the idea that only when we are connected and care for the well-being of the whole is a civil and democratic society created'* (2022 p. 9).'

While community often is held as an absolute ideal, we should also be able to consider a different perspective. Ahmed and Fortier (2003) argue that communities often rely on shared norms and values that can marginalise or silence those who do not conform. Also, community is intertwined with diversity and identity, both individual and collective. Alternative communities develop, sometimes in resistance to existing narratives, as we see with different subcultures or groups. The emotional and affective dimensions of community life, should also be factored in, highlighting how feelings of comfort and discomfort play a role in the inclusion and exclusion processes. Librarians, then, should have an awareness of how communities can be spaces of both solidarity and exclusion, which urges a continuous reflection on how they relate to groups and individuals.

Lastly, I would like to expand on the term relational competence, and its significance as a means of developing librarianship along the aforementioned social turn, and participatory culture in libraries. The concept is used in different fields and professions and is defined and understood in several ways. From the field of sociopsychology, Hansson et al. (1984, p. 273) explain it as *'characteristics of the individual that facilitate the acquisition, development, and maintenance of mutually satisfying relationships'*, and Carpenter (1993) observes it as consisting of two dimensions, 1) initiation and 2) enhancement through the maintenance of relationships.

While relational competence is often connected with personality and individual communication and wellbeing, there is a Nordic tradition of observing relational competence as part of a professional role, particularly within the helping professions (Aubert and Bakke, 2018; Klinge, 2021), but also for leaders and managers. It is used both to look more closely into the professionals' relationships with those they care for or teach, but also in terms of relationships with co-workers, management or similar. Thus, it is not a term that is limited to one type of relationship, for example between a teacher and a pupil, but encompasses any type of relationship. Aubert and Bakke (2018) stress that for professionals, relational competence is intertwined with their overall proficiency and helps guide them in situations where their professional qualifications and competence intersect with interpersonal communication and individual needs. It also entails a component of self-awareness and reflection when it comes to interactions with others.

Librarians' relational role in communities

How can we understand librarians' relational role in communities? This really comes down to the way librarians are engaging with library users. Likewise, how librarians create relationships with different community groups will affect how and if they experience the library as an inclusive space. The following section is intended to highlight some aspects of what I propose to be the relational role of librarians.

The relational aspects of librarianship have not been given much attention within empirical research, with some exceptions (Aranelo Douglas and Gadsby, 2019; Evjen 2021; Fuhr and Popowich, 2022). However, several studies shed light on librarians' knowledge and skills connected to communication, trust building or ability to engage and connect with others. This is especially

evident in studies of librarians' work with children or youth, or cooperation within an organisation – like school librarians, who depend on cooperation with both teaching staff and school management. Gärden (2017) shows the importance of close working relationships between the school librarian and teachers for the school library to reach its full pedagogical potential. Likewise, making the library's role and contribution visible to the management is important for its place in the school's organisation. Establishing such cooperation proves challenging for school librarians – but no less important (Latham et al., 2013). Similarly, for academic librarians, there is a need to connect both with students and student groups, as well as with teaching staff administration and management (Fuhr and Popowich, 2022).

For public librarians, there is a need to build relationships with community members, the local government and local government administration, as well as the community surroundings. To develop and maintain a wider range of services and projects, cooperation with local organisations is vital. Last, but not least, the ability to connect with the individual user is vital to establish the library as a welcoming and inclusive community knowledge hub. A challenge is of course to also be visible and available for those who do not regularly visit the library. Being aware of the importance of connection, and being able to work on relationship-building, run like a common thread through the librarian's professional practice. The work of Vårheim (2011, 2014), and Johnson (2012), are two examples that illustrate how librarians help foster trust and create community. Johnson (2012) observes that for some patrons *'libraries seemed to act as a kind of middle ground between close family and friends, and more formal helping agencies, such as school counselors or welfare agencies. It may be the neutrality of the library worker that is attractive to the patron – someone who will listen but will not get too involved in their problems'* (p.57). Yet, as findings from Johnson's study show, not all librarians are comfortable with establishing personal relationships with library patrons. Integrating relational competence in LIS education could be helpful for future librarians, not only to create awareness around the fact that as a librarian, you will have a relational role, but even more so, to establish this as part of a professional practice, not a personal one.

One main challenge, of course, presents itself when dimensions of diversity (both primary and secondary) are issues of debate or disagreement, like immigration, identity/gender issues or religion. According to the liberal-democratic principles on which librarianship is based, these discussions or opinions should not be muted. Still, the content might cause distress to already marginalised groups. Navigating these conversations while retaining the trust and inclusion of the community is a challenge for librarians (Carlsson et al., 2023; Nissen and Kann-Rasmussen, 2022)

As Johnston et al (2022) note, the decline in interaction between diverse community groups is another concern libraries, too, must consider. Research suggests that diversity can have a negative impact on trust – but also that it can be mitigated by social ties – connectedness on an individual or small group level (Stolle et al., 2008). Since libraries generally cater for a wide range of users, they offer an arena well-suited to promoting social connectedness, and indeed fostering relationships. Librarians, in turn, need to have the necessary relational competence to be able to facilitate these processes, engaging with community members, organisations, volunteers and so forth. As Johnston et al. (2022) note, small groups in particular can be especially beneficial in terms of establishing affective ties among individuals.

Building trust, maintaining dialogue and communication are core aspects of relational competence. For librarians, especially those operating in diverse communities, these aspects represent both a general competence, but also a more specific approach to enabling social connection between individuals and groups in the community.

Children and youth: an example of trust as a relational aspect of librarianship

Trust is recognised as a key component, not only in interpersonal relationships at the micro level, but at the macro level, for organisations, communities and even nation states (Fukuyama, 1995).

However, trust is a complex issue, one that scholars struggle to categorise, according to Nannestad (2008). In the literature it is described as an attitude, a decision, a relationship or '*a general outlook on human nature*' – to name a few. It is referred to as the most important ingredient of social capital and forms the basis of any relationship. Building trust is also a key component of relational competence. But how is trust built? How do we foster trust in diverse communities? This, of course, is a complex issue and certainly not for librarians to solve or answer alone. But an awareness that librarians, too, can – and should – contribute is the first step.

Building trust takes time. And of course, trust is interpersonal; it is a quality that exists between people, individuals and groups. Thus, people are more likely to trust one another after several interactions rather than on a first one-shot basis (Ostrom and Walker, 2003). Libraries are places that bring people together, whether it is as high or low intensive meeting places (Audunson, 2005). But does this alone foster trust? Research shows that it might: becoming aware of *otherness* in a non-threatening context. Some studies suggest that libraries could be a contributing factor in building social capital (see for example Vårheim 2011, 2014; Johnson 2012). But while libraries are important arenas, it will still be the librarians who initiate programmes, who welcome people in, who encourage conversations.

To illustrate, one example is how children's librarians work with trust and relationships. Johansson (2010) has studied children's librarians' self-perception and found that they describe themselves as a '*different kind of adult*', someone that the children trust, but someone for whom the children do not need to accomplish anything. A later study by Johansson and Hultgren (2018) confirms this impression, observing how teachers and parents tend to regulate children's behaviour when coming to the library. Evjen and Vold (2018) explore how library professionals work towards developing participation in a library for children between the ages of ten and fifteen. The librarians want an open and free environment for the children so they can participate as co-creators in developing the library. This, however, is contingent upon the children feeling safe so that they dare to take advantage of this freedom. For this to happen, rules that give the space predictability and create a safe environment are needed, and children need to be able to engage and connect with the staff. While developing trust between librarian and patron is important in any library, it is perhaps especially important when children are involved, thus elucidating the relational competence of children's librarians.

Librarians' competences and skills

The evolving demands of librarianship prompts a re-evaluation of competencies and skills, particularly in the context of relational librarianship. This section explores the distinctions between competencies and skills, the growing emphasis on interpersonal abilities and the role of education in preparing librarians to engage with communities effectively.

In his *Atlas of librarianship*, Lankes (2012, p. 137) makes a distinction between librarians' competencies and skills, the former being '*broad and durable approaches to fulfilling our mission*', while the latter refers to '*less broad and less durable means of fulfilling competencies*'. The four overarching competencies consist of '*access, knowledge, environment and motivation*'. Traditional skills include well-known areas such as knowledge organisation, collection management, administration and so forth. Each skill has in turn certain – varying or changing – technologies and techniques attached. These are distinctions to keep in mind while exploring *relational competence*.

Through a comprehensive review of literature discussing skills and competencies of LIS professionals, Nonthacumjane (2011) divides the findings into three broad categories: personal skills – like being flexible, creative or analytical; generic skills – like information literacy, communication or critical thinking; and lastly discipline specific knowledge – like metadata, database development or user needs. Koh and Abbas (2015) studied which competencies are

needed for information professionals in learning labs and makerspaces, and concluded that the ability to learn, adapt and collaborate was ranked as top three. Radford and Radford (2017) draw on interpersonal communication theory in their book *Library conversations* in which they underline the importance of communication in interpersonal encounters. Lankes (2012) also brings communication into focus when he reflects on the importance of conversation in library science and how conversations form a bridge between library science and communication. The skills needed for bringing these conversations to life are perhaps both personal and generic, but they are arguably also relational in the sense that they bring people together. His work is resonated in Johnston et al. (2022), who point out that conversations foster connections.

Several scholars have shed light on the skills and competencies of librarians that goes beyond discipline-specific knowledge. Matteson et al. (2019) explored academic librarians' practice and found that the librarians reported using 'a set of relational skills around interpersonal communication and interacting with people' (p.437). The authors note that these skills aligned with other conceptual models of what soft skills are. Chow et al. (2011) did a comprehensive survey of library managers regarding LIS graduates' skills. Ranked as most important were skills related to communication and people management. When they rated satisfaction with graduates' skills in this area, the results were neutral to unsatisfactory. '*Some of the comments reflected the opinion that working in a library means working with people, and librarians need to be equipped with people skills*' (Chow et al., 2011 p. 15). When exploring what knowledge, skills and abilities are considered core for professional public librarians, Williams and Saunders (2020) found that soft skills, such as interpersonal communication and customer service were ranked highly among survey respondents consisting of LIS professionals, alumni and faculty. Gjestrum et al (2018) analysed job announcements from the library field and found that both ICT skills and communication were most frequently mentioned. A recent study of librarians' perceptions of their professional role suggests both that they are adapting to the social turn, and also that there are areas in which they need more competence. Some of these areas are *relational*, as they mention the roles of youth workers, social workers and integration consultants as relevant in the libraries (Johnston et al., 2021). Although these studies are different, both in design and perspective, they do point in the same direction: there is a need for relational competence in the professional field.

Relational competence and LIS education

The third issue this paper addresses is relational competence as part of LIS education. This paper does not review studies of LIS education components but presents studies on what skills librarians use in different community contexts, as well as what needs there are in the professional library field, seen in the context of the curriculum in LIS programmes.

While it is possible to discuss many aspects of librarianship and LIS education, this paper's focus is relational competence in a community context. Diverse communities might present librarians with added challenges. Librarians need skills that allow them to build trust and inclusion and mediate – rather than avoid – conflicting opinions. First, it should be noted that diversity could represent a challenge for LIS programmes. Jaeger et al. (2015) assert that the field of LIS has '*struggled with issues of diversity and inclusion in the composition of information professionals, in educational content, and in connecting with many communities*' (p. 150). The challenge, it seems, is not only to attract applicants from diverse backgrounds to LIS programmes, but also for librarians to reach out to their communities in a meaningful way.

However, addressing these challenges can yield significant benefits by preparing graduates to navigate complex social dynamics and promote social cohesion. By emphasising relational librarianship, LIS programmes can contribute to a transformative shift in librarianship that aligns with contemporary societal needs.

There are great differences in educational systems, which makes it difficult to compare programmes. However, it seems as if the knowledge and skills sought after by the library field do have common features, both in different areas of librarianship (academic, public, school), and also in different countries. A recent study by Saunders and Bajjaly (2021) suggests that a variety of soft skills are incorporated into LIS programmes in the US, but more through passive than active learning.

Saunders (2015) raises the important issue of what it is possible to teach in a classroom setting – are soft skills something that can really be taught? Relational competence certainly includes several of the soft skills the literature presents, which are more prevalent in certain personalities than in others. However, relational competence in a professional setting also encompasses your ability to combine hard and soft skills when communicating and networking with different groups and people, while being able to reflect on your own role and communication. The aspect of self-awareness and understanding your own role as you initiate and facilitate contact with others develops over time, but is clearly something students need to be aware of. In the context of librarianship, the individual component is less important than the discussion and understanding of *how* relational competence can contribute to improving communities and also to developing librarianship as a professional field. If we acknowledge that librarians not only need soft skills – which research indicates – but also comprehensive understanding of what these skills are, why they are needed and how they can be developed in different contexts, then we also acknowledge the need for relational competence.

Formal education is one side of librarianship; professional practice is another. Not all aspects of being a librarian can – or should – be put on the curriculum. Yet, if LIS programmes teach students how libraries evolve and the complexity of operating in diverse communities, they also have a responsibility to create awareness of the knowledge, competencies and skills librarians need to meet different community needs, including social connectedness and community building – as well as an understanding of how these will develop in professional practice. Students in LIS aspiring to careers in libraries should early on be made aware of the relational role libraries play in the communities they operate.

Relational librarianship – can it be taught?

Relational librarianship provides a framework where soft skills, as described by Saunders (2015), Matteson et al. (2016) and Williams and Saunders (2020) can be directly related to the librarian's role: as a bridge-builder both within and outside the library.

Matteson et al. (2016) relate that the term 'soft skill' is rarely defined and is somewhat difficult to capture precisely. But they also stress the importance of such skills, and that they should be acknowledged by LIS education programmes. They are not satisfied that these types of skills can be learned 'on the job' alone. *'Moving away from research to application, we identify a strong need for instructional materials to develop soft skills both in LIS coursework and in continuing education'* (Matteson et al., 2016, p. 85). Research shows that this type of competence is sought after in the professional field (Chow et al., 2011; Gjestrum et al., 2018; William and Saunders, 2020). While relational competence certainly develops over time and with experience, community and professional needs suggest that LIS education programmes should include learning outcomes related to relational competence.

Librarians are more and more expected to engage in community building, both within and outside of their organisational affiliation. Are they equipped and prepared to do so? The social turn of libraries is broadly accepted among library professionals, but there is also a recognition of lacking skills related to this development (Johnston et al., 2021). If the next generation of librarians are going to fulfil their mission to better communities (Lankes, 2012), be '*radical positive change agents*',

and truly contribute to social connectedness in their communities, they need increased awareness of their role as librarians – the relational aspects of librarianship – and how they can be developed.

Summing up: relational librarianship

In this paper, I have reflected on libraries' increased involvement in community building and the relevance of relational competence within librarianship and LIS education, in terms of both concept and content. I have introduced the concept of relational librarianship, to provide a perspective on the evolving social role of libraries, and the implications for library professionals. Relational librarianship redefines the profession by emphasising the relational dimensions of library work. By prioritising relational competence, libraries can better serve their communities, promote inclusivity and remain relevant in an increasingly interconnected world.

In my view, relational librarianship highlights how relational competence permeates librarians' practice. It includes the ability to reflect over one's professional role as a librarian in relation to others – patrons, colleagues, collaborators – and how one communicates. Still, empirical data is needed to test, clarify and adapt the dimensions to the librarians' professional context. A question that also needs addressing is whether these aspects can be translated into skills that together make out the relational competence, or if they need to be considered in a less specific manner.

If we look at what constitutes librarians' knowledge base, the relational aspects are not necessarily visible in curriculums and LIS programmes. However, studies exploring what skills the professional field calls for show that so-called soft skills are ranked highly (Chow et al., 2011; Saunders, 2015; Williams and Saunders, 2020). Librarians need to build relationships in terms of the service provision, cooperation and strategic positioning of the library.

Relational competence should not be viewed as a personal trait but as a professional skill integral to librarianship. By embedding relational competence into professional training and practice, librarians can more effectively support social cohesion and community building. This perspective shifts the focus from individual transactions to the broader impact of librarians as facilitators of trust and inclusion within diverse communities.

Being able to bring people together, navigate and handle different types of user needs, situations and settings while maintaining boundaries is part of librarians' professional role. Creating a safe space – for children and adults alike – needs active involvement and awareness. The ability to build networks, and community nodes and connect people and groups is something that librarians should aspire to have (Bourke, 2005). As Scott points out (2011), libraries have yet to reach their potential in building communities of relationships. That could be related to the fact that we have a) failed to recognise this as part of librarianship, and b) not included such competence in LIS education.

In conclusion, as this paper establishes, the introduction of relational librarianship presents a concept for advancing the role of libraries within communities, at a time when social connectedness is needed more than ever. The concept not only emphasises the importance of relational competence for librarians but also provides the necessary vocabulary to explore and cultivate this competence in both professional practice and LIS education. In doing so, it enriches the scholarly tradition of library and information science, fostering a deeper understanding of how social connections and relational skills can transform library services and strengthen community engagement. Ultimately, this framework advocates for a more relationally aware approach to LIS, one that meets the evolving needs of diverse communities.

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