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Borrowing tools from the public library

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate tool lending library patrons' perception of their tool borrowing, in order to explore the role of a public lending service in the context of their lives. It addresses the research question, why do patrons borrow tools from the library?

Design/methodology/approach – A case study was conducted, consisting of semi-structured interviews with patrons of a tool lending library. Led by a phenomenographic approach, the interviews focused on participants' recounted experiences. Transcripts were structured into major categories and underlying themes. Findings were discussed from a perspective taking departure in Wiegand's notion of "the library in the life of the user," and summarized with regards to sustainable community development.

Findings – Participants are found to talk about their tool borrowing from two main viewpoints. First, reasons for making the decision. This involves weighing practical considerations, e.g., cost, storage, access, and frequency of use. It also includes ideological motivations, and sympathy with the concept. Second, effects of their borrowing, interpreted as how it enables them. This enablement includes inspiration, learning, support to self-employment, and strengthening of community. Patrons focus on local aspects of social and economic development, rather than global or environmental motivations.

Research limitations/implications – A single and in part unique setting was studied. The findings provide foundation for a developed discussion on the societal role of public libraries providing "non-traditional" materials such as tools, with particular regards to community settings and sustainability.

Originality/value – Addresses knowledge gaps on borrowing and tool lending libraries.

Keywords Public libraries, Communities, Borrowing, Non-traditional collections, Tool lending libraries
Paper type Research paper

I was in complete shock and awe and amazement that such a thing could exist (tool library patron).

1. Introduction

Borrowing is arguably a trademark utility of the public library. Given that, there is surprisingly scarce empirical research on what borrowing is, how it can be understood and contextualized, or why the borrower borrows. Lending, on the other hand, is more frequently discussed. Lending and borrowing could be treated as two sides of the same thing, but the difference does represent an important distinction in perspective. Lending is the perspective of the library – the lending party in transactions with patrons. Lending can be conceptualized in any number of observable quantities or qualities, available from the viewpoint of the library. The lending perspective is demarcated by the library itself, what happens in, with, and between libraries. The horizon of inquiry will typically only reach to the contact surface with patrons and end there. Studies may also probe into the user-side of the transaction, for example regarding returns and fines (cf. Davies and Sen, 2013) and patron-initiated acquisition and collection development (cf. Hodges *et al.*, 2010).

However, such inquiries into lending will still largely represent a library perspective on the borrowing activity; the patrons and their borrowing are in a sense assumed. Lending is a link in the circulation chain, and circulation is a library activity, not a



patron activity. When patrons leave the library they disappear into the void of their lives outside of the library context. A borrowing perspective on the other hand, would see patrons' borrowing from the library as one acquisition strategy among others, and does not leave the patrons when they leave the library. Such a perspective is lacking in current LIS research. Our understanding of libraries would benefit from knowing more about patrons' appropriation of items, and their relation to the structures that provide them.

This study investigates a patron perspective of borrowing, viewing the public library as a place to get things. To discuss this, and partly also challenge a traditional library perspective, the paper looks to the example of tool lending libraries (TLL). They offer what could be described as non-traditional collections (Söderholm and Nolin, 2015), consisting of items more commonly acquired by other means, such as buying or renting. In this study they are used as a starting point for exploring and discussing borrowing in relation to issues such as ownership and different means of acquisition. Also, TLLs are still a relatively uncommon community service. This provides an opportunity to explore how people use and perceive this type of public library service and what purpose it serves them in the context of their community.

The next section presents the conceptual starting points for the study. It is followed by a section on research design outlining the method for conducting the interview case study. Next, forming the major part of the work, interview results are presented and discussed in Section 4, focusing on describing TLL patrons and how they perceive their tool borrowing. In the final section, a concluding summary of the findings is presented.

2. Tool borrowing in the life of the patron

Public libraries are not agents of consumerism – libraries do not sell. Still, the library can be construed as a place with relevance to people in their capacity as consumers (Rooney-Browne and McMenemy, 2010). In particular, the consumption of information, and problems related to the notion, has rendered LIS interest (Poirier and Robinson, 2014). Also, libraries can be approached in more functions than as mere information services. Like stores and rental businesses, libraries too are places for people to get things, to bring home. This is an important distinction when studying borrowing from a patron perspective. Recognizing that patrons are also consumers, aids an analysis that does not assume patrons go to the library solely because they are committed Library Users. The decision to borrow an item instead of buying or renting it is a consumer's decision. The act of borrowing can be re-interpreted as form of collaborative consumption by framing it as shared use (Mont, 2004) – distribution of access to one item across many users. This approach opens up for analysis influenced by critical-emancipatory theory (Murray and Ozanne, 1991). In the “consuming life” of the patron[1], the emancipatory potential of utilizing library services could then be explored.

In order to understand borrowing this study takes a social situated approach to public libraries from the standpoint of its patrons. It draws upon Wiegand's (2003) argument for studying the library in the life of the user, as opposed to studying the user in the life of the library[2]. The approach is adapted to this study's aim at exploring the patron perspective of borrowing tools in their capacity as community members, not just library goers.

Thus, the setting for the patron's life is the community. This setting is made up together with – and shared by – a host of fellow community members and actors,

including the public library. This perspective also addresses patrons' relationship to the provision of collections and services, physically located in the community (Söderholm and Nolin, 2015). The space taken up by the library is renegotiated into a social community place, enabling, among other things, systematic borrowing. For this study, community is principally employed in two contrasting senses, as discussed by Amit (2002). First, community is the actualized or realized context of social relations, for instance the neighborhood surrounding the library branch. This is the seemingly ontological community, the social setting which a library patron may refer to directly, possibly explicitly by themselves using the "community" label. The second usage is community as idea, a construct for the interpretation of dimensions of sociality. This latter application is ultimately an ideal type, and as such "not a description of reality but an analytical tool" (Blackshaw, 2010, p. 10), i.e. a theoretical model. Accordingly, identifying library patrons as "community members" relies on both the theoretical notion of the library and its user-base as co-constructing community, and the patrons' own accounts of being part of a specific context, living in their neighborhood and so on. Potentially connected to both the above distinctions of community, is a third interpretation relevant to this study: community as ideological position. This is a philosophical, ethical, politicized understanding, such as represented by communitarianism. By turning notions of community into ideals and arguments, these may then be posted in critical (and remedial) opposition to other positions, chiefly individualism, and some interpretations of liberalism. Communitarianism's community-as-agenda has been described as social environmentalism, whose proponents "do not seek to bring society back to a state of nature but to advance it, toward a good society" (Etzioni, 2004, p. 1). Attention to these kinds of ethical and directional dimensions of community may be relevant for discussing positioning in library patrons' perception of the sociality of their borrowing, and how they, for example see it related to change.

This paper aims at identifying conceptualizations of tool borrowing, in order to explore the role of a public tool lending library in the lives of the community members it serves. It responds to the following main question:

RQ1. Why do patrons borrow tools from the library?

The question is addressed through a case study with patrons of a US tool lending library. It is part of a research project on borrowing and non-traditional libraries, with particular regards to the societal role of the public library as a place to get things. This paper focuses on tool borrowing as such, from a patron perspective. Subsequent articles will further explore the role of TLLs, from the perspectives of patrons, staff, and managers.

3. Research design

3.1 Setting and participants

This case study focuses on the patrons of a public tool lending library in Berkeley in northern California. It has been in operation for over 30 years and its relatively long lifespan was a principal reason for selecting it as a case. Though it is difficult to map, most other TLLs appear to be younger, and so would likely have a less established and perhaps narrower, more homogenous group of patrons, at least in terms of tool library experience. A non-traditional library that has been in operation for over 30 years presents a unique opportunity to recruit a wider spectrum of study participants. The studied case could thus be categorized as unusual in part, if not extreme (Yin, 2014).

It still has traits of the common or exemplifying case (Bryman, 2012) in that the parent setting is an otherwise presumably “regular” branch library, and that there are numerous other TLLs.

The Berkeley tool lending library is part of the city’s South Branch Library, sharing the premises but housed in its own building. It was initiated as a program in 1979, partly free-standing, with its own funding through a federal block grant. The service was specifically targeted at the low-income neighborhoods where the TLL was located – and still is today, though the area has probably somewhat gentrified since. The purpose was to support housing and mitigate urban blight by providing access to useful resources. Eventually, around 1990, the operation was fully incorporated into the rest of the library and funded through the same city budget. Though the Berkeley tool lending library is part of a neighborhood branch and historically aimed at serving the immediate surrounding areas, it today serves the whole city as its only tool lending operation.

A total of 22 participating patrons were recruited for the study. In total, 15 individual interviews were conducted in 2011 followed by seven interviews one year later, in the summer of 2012. The participating patrons were mainly recruited on the library premises in conjunction with handing out patron surveys[3]. The selection of participants aimed at a varied composition of individuals with regards to factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, tool experience, and TLL membership time. The purpose of this selection strategy is to uncover a range of potentially relevant themes for exploration rather than to chart a representative slice of a particular population composition.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Participants were interviewed in a semi-structured format. The direction of the interviews and shaping of questions were influenced by a phenomenographic approach where the focus is on the recounted experiences of the participant (Pang, 2003). This allowed for a dynamic interview structure where more general answers – typically views and opinions – was a prompt to ask them to give specific examples. Conversely, their accounts of specific experiences could be followed up with questions asking them how they see it. The interview was structured around the following main topics: the participant’s background as a patron, their tool usage, how they acquire tools, and their experience of borrowing from the tool lending library. Interview lengths ranged from 17 to 111 minutes, with a median length of 51 minutes. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed into text. This material was initially structured into major perspectives. Themes were then identified within these perspectives, using open coding. These themes are neither rigid nor mutually exclusive, but rather suggestions on different angles of interpretation.

4. Results and discussion

The results are presented in three sections. First, a short overview of the participating patrons is given in Section 4.1. The main findings are then discussed in Sections 4.2 and 4.3. These sections reflect the two major perspectives which emerged on how participants would talk about their tool borrowing. One perspective (Section 4.2) deals with how they talk about the reasons for their tool borrowing. The other perspective (Section 4.3) deals with how they talk about effects or implications of tool borrowing, i.e. what their tool borrowing means.

4.1 *Who are the patrons?*

Participants represented a diverse range both in terms of background and, as it turned out, the views and experiences they expressed regarding interview topics. The individual patron borrows tools predominantly for one of two general purposes:

- (1) for layperson's projects in their home, such as maintenance, gardening, and renovation projects; or
- (2) for professional, paid, or voluntary work, in a trade such as carpentry or plumbing, as a handyperson for hire, or a property owner/developer.

These two groups are detailed in Table I. Being a case study of a named library, the participants are only presented as groups in order to maintain anonymity. The layperson group has been labeled "hobbyists." The professionals have been divided into two sub-groups: handy- and tradespersons, and developers and landlords. The reason for this is that the participating landlords and property developers stood out, in that their tool borrowing tended to be for both professional and personal use. They will occasionally be needing tools for working on their own home, in the manner of maintaining the rest of their property. Still, their tool borrowing appeared to be prompted mainly by work on properties other than their home, and so they are included in "professionals." Also, they are different from the handy- and tradespersons group in that they work on their own property, whereas the former group does hired work on other peoples' property.

All participants but one were fairly straight forward to place in their respective category. The exception was a person who organizes voluntary "work parties" and borrows tools for collective use on those occasions. Depending on definition, s/he could have been placed in either or both categories, or warranted a separate category. S/he was here categorized as hobbyist, due to mainly borrowing for private, unpaid projects of own initiative.

Note that the division of participants into hobbyists and professionals only indicate the application of their tool use; it does not necessarily signify skill level or experience. There may be hobbyists who are highly skilled and even have experience from professional tool work. Likewise, patrons borrowing tools for paid work may be new to the trade and relatively inexperienced. In the case of landlords, it may also be that they themselves only perform basic maintenance and repairs, and hire others to do more qualified work.

Category	Age (median) ^a	Gender	Years of TLL use (median)	Participants
Hobbyists	25-75 (45)	F(7), M(5)	0-32 (13)	P2, P4-P6, P8, P10, P11, P15, P16, P19-P21
<i>Professionals</i>				
Handy and tradespersons	25-70 (55)	F(1), M(5)	6-32 (19)	P1, P7, P12-P14, P22
Developers and landlords	40-75 (62.5)	F(1), M(3)	9-32 (20)	P3, P9, P17, P18
Overall	25-75 (50)	F(9), M(13)	0-32 (16)	P1-P22

Note: ^aAge has been tallied in five-year intervals

Table I. Participant categories and dispersion by age, gender, and years of using the tool lending library

4.2 Reasons for borrowing tools from the library

Patrons express a variety of motivations for their borrowing. However, one strong commonality can be traced across the different accounts: a recurring notion is what could be framed as a kind of weighted consideration. The decision whether to buy or borrow is explained as weighing resource factors, such as storage space and acquisition cost, against utility factors such as tool performance and frequency of use. All participants bring up such considerations, to varying degree and in varying combinations of specific factors. These considerations pertain to: access and usage, cost, tool type, library vs private borrowing, and political and ideological motivations.

4.2.1 Access and usage. A prominent reason for borrowing, which most participants stress, is frequency of use. Practically all participants talk about how often they will be needing it, as a deciding factor whether to buy or borrow:

I generally make the decision based on how often am I gonna need this, and is the amount of running around I'm gonna have to do to get access to it through the tool lending library going to be prohibitive. If not, then I will happily borrow it, forever (P10).

Several patrons combine the arguments of frequency of use with other considerations, of which various aspects of storage seems to be perhaps the most important. The participants are reluctant to storing a lot of tools, in particular those of infrequent use:

There are things that I bought I wish I didn't, because they have them at the tool library. [...] I bought a tile cutter, and that's something we don't use that often, it's just sitting in the garage (P17).

Taken together, the considerations of frequency of use and storage could be seen as an access issue. Convenient access to tools, for some patrons, may be regarded as a critical factor to owning your own tools. Not owning your own tools is potentially problematic and impractical if unexpected needs arise:

[...] you don't have it at your fingertips, you can't just like wake up at midnight and go, oh I need this, and have it right there (P8).

Such emergency tool use on unorthodox hours did not seem to be an actual, frequent issue for the participants. Rather, the point seemed to be preparedness itself; to be properly equipped to handle scenarios which might arise. Owning your own tools provides insurance and reassurance. Indeed, most of the participants argued that their borrowing was almost always prompted by some direct need which had arisen. This was illustrated by how they responded to the question of when they would typically borrow tools, and if they saw any pattern to their borrowing, such as depending on season or weather. They would then answer that they borrowed tools "whenever they needed them" and that it did not depend on other factors. Only one participant mentioned any kind of borrowing pattern, in that s/he would mostly go to the library on weekends, being restricted by long work-hours on weekdays.

The tool lending library seems to be conceptualized by some of the patrons as an extension of their own resources, both in terms of storage and tool collection. These participants seem to be well familiar with the library collection; they know what they can get there and not. The tool library allows them to complete their tool set, and they can put back the tools they use in the "library storage" instead of in their own storage.

Other factors mentioned in relation to storage include safety considerations, such as storing tools in your home which are potentially dangerous to children, and the risk of theft. In that view, "storing" tools at the library instead, is the safer alternative.

The concept of convenience seems relevant to several participants. The various factors to how a tool is acquired need to mount up to being convenient, for a particular acquisition option to be attractive. The merit to a given strategy for accessing, acquiring, and managing a tool is then gauged by its overall convenience, measured by a composite of factors: price, location, storage, frequency of use, and so forth. It may be convenient to buy a power drill you expect to use a lot, rather than to depend on the tool library. Likewise, it may be convenient to instead borrow a large ladder, even if it means driving it back and forth every time, just to circumvent the storage issue.

4.2.2 Cost. The economics involved will factor into how most, but not all, patrons motivate their borrowing. Few patrons talk only about saving money as an isolated motivation. Rather, cost is discussed in relation to other factors such as the aforementioned frequency and storage. On one side of the scale then is the resource consumption of owning the tool: the cost of purchase, and/or letting up the space to store it. On the other side is some aspect of the tool's utility and expected use. The prospective tool acquirer then argues that there is a tipping point where borrowing makes more sense than buying. One professional, for example, who owns "tens of thousands of dollars" worth of tools, explains:

We possess a number of tools that we use repeatedly [...] But when we need unusual sizes or sizes that we don't use frequently, we get them there. So, tools that are extremely expensive but for us rarely used, or voluminous, difficult to store, are what we borrow (P1).

Further aspects, such as quality, and the experience itself of going to the library, may also factor in:

I think they probably have good quality things, and for something that I only use infrequently I don't wanna go out spend the money that it would cost to buy something good quality, and I don't usually wanna buy something bad quality. So, yeah, it's just fairly convenient to go up there, and I like visiting 'cos I like those guys and the tools seem to be good (P11).

Where a needed tool is located may also factor into considering which alternative is the more cost-effective. When performing work in many different locations, tool acquisition can be partly based on where available tools are in relation to the work site:

I can go out and get sheet rock knives that I might not have on me, at a hardware store that's just down the street, for maybe less money than it would cost to drive to the tool lending library [...] But, if it's a pricey item, a right-angle drill or something like that, [and I'm] only gonna need it for maybe one particular application, it's worth the drive over there (P7).

This is a more relative perspective on availability than merely going by what you own and not, or whether you want to buy it or not. Thus, several cost factors are considered in the decision: item price, time required to get it, and transport.

4.2.3 Tool type. Apart from various practical considerations, and the issue of cost, a tool user may also divide their acquisition preference by the kind of tool in question:

I tend to borrow a lot of the clamps, a lot of the little non-motorized tools, just because they're just nice to have, and I don't have to keep them. But as far as motorized tools, I tend to research those a bit more thoroughly, and I tend to just buy those (P3).

Several notable things are suggested in this quote. First, this patron seems to prefer to borrow tools which are of a more "straight-forward" design, where there is not much to consider on aspects such as quality, functionality, or brand. Second, the patron makes distinction between having a tool, and actually keeping the tool, i.e. owning it.

This suggests an access and utility-oriented attitude toward tool usage. Ownership is not seen as a prerequisite for convenient access to tools in general, but rather as a process of quality assurance for advanced tool types which are subject to a wider range of performance variation. Ownership is then a means to reliability rather than access, a gatekeeping function to weed out potentially bad tools. This not only a performance concern but also one of safety. Power tools are often dangerous, and some participants express concern with borrowing such tools when they do not know how they have been handled by previous users. Such issues of handling and care may likewise play into whether the participant will tend to lend their tools to others. Some participants are hesitant to lending out certain tools for the same reasons they are reluctant to borrowing them. They talk of the importance of knowing a tool's history, being familiar with how to handle it, and knowing how it has been handled by others. Lending or borrowing a tool would then create blind spots in its usage history, and the tool might be subject to abuse.

By the same line of argument, borrowing may be less of an obstacle with tools intended for rougher, non-precision work:

The tight tolerance may not matter. An example, a jackhammer, I don't care what it does, as long as it breaks concrete (P3).

So the perceived problem with the unknown of what an item has gone through seems to mainly concern more delicate power tools.

4.2.4 Library vs private borrowing. Within the larger structure of borrowing, there may also be further subsets of decisions to be made, expressed in various motivations and sentiments. When deciding how to borrow a tool, for example, the respondent might argue:

Sometimes I'll think of a friend and then I'll think, oh yeah I'll just go to the tool library because it's a little less of an imposition [...] sometimes a little less personal and sort of easier, like, that's what the tool library is for (P2).

This notion that "it's what the tool library is for" seems to be key to several patrons in borrowing from the library rather than from friends or family. Accordingly, other peoples' tools are not nominally for borrowing:

For them, buying a tool, it's like they work so hard to buy this tool, and they don't wanna let anyone borrow it because they think they might break it. Because of this mentality I stay away from borrowing tools from friends. The tool lending library doesn't have that mentality, they'll let anybody borrow tools and they have more tools than my friends have tools. Believe it or not, they have better tools than my friends have (P5).

Utilizing the library as the main resource for your borrowing then makes sense because you have the access and privilege to do so by default; it does not depend on, or affect, your personal relationships. Added to that, the patron may also perceive the library to have better tools than their friends.

Borrowing from the library because that is what it is for, has another side to it as well. Some patrons point out that the tool lending library is a way for them to get something back from the city, something useful for their tax money:

We pay a lot of tax, as property owners, we pay a lot of tax to the city, to establish these facilities. And so I figure I utilize it (P3).

Thus, going to the library may be a way for patrons to take part in the investment they make in their city. The tool lending library for them becomes a concrete way in which their money is put to work for the benefit of themselves and their fellow community members.

4.2.5 Political and ideological motivations. Most of the participating patrons do not express any apparent high-level ideological motives for their borrowing. There are however those that do; one patron, for example argues that the tool lending library works in Berkeley because it is a sustainability-oriented community, and regarding her/his own motivations says:

One of the components to this is, I borrow because I don't wanna make another tool, everything that gets put together costs energy. So if I could borrow and use it, and put it back, I'm not taxing the resources (P3).

Another patron talks about "our consumer oriented culture" and that the tool lending library is something which is "very anti-consumer," arguing similarly to P3 that:

I really support the concept. I'm all about producing less stuff. If we can not produce one more thing, that's ideal I think (P8).

However, most of the participants do not put any express ideological points into explaining their borrowing, at least not in the manner of positioning it with regards to some larger system of ideas. Rather, a recurring notion is the more vague but highly interesting idea of what "makes sense": it does not make sense for each and every community member to just sit on the same tools that are not used very often. It makes sense to be able to borrow them from the library instead.

A special case of the ideological position are the patrons who express sympathy toward the tool library as a concept. They support the idea of a tool lending library, and see it as an important service for the community to have. For them, this seemingly has become a reason in itself to utilize the library and check out tools. By going to the library and using it, by actively mantling the role of one of the community members which the library is for, the patrons express their support. They make themselves into examples that the library is needed and utilized.

4.3 Tool borrowing as enablement

Borrowing also seems to be a richer issue than merely the various decisions and considerations that go into the acquisition process. The participants also talk about what their borrowing means to them, what impact it has. In being able to borrow, the participants seem to find themselves enabled in a number of ways. Such enablement includes: inspiration and encouragement to do things with tools, experience and learning, support to become (and be) self-employed, and support of the development of their community.

4.3.1 Inspiration and encouragement. Several participants mention that the very fact that they can borrow tools from the library helps them to do new things, or more things than they would have otherwise. Some participants seem to perceive their tool borrowing as having a direct impact on what they do with tools:

I've gotten ideas, and I've done more work because of the tools that I can use. [...] being able to borrow tools has affected the way that I garden, and I'll keep my backyard. So I do more, because I have more tools. [...] I was never gonna buy a big shovel, I probably would have

continued planting small plants. [...] But since I discovered the lending library I've been planting big things. I've planted an apple tree, and I bought a lemon tree, and I've bought these big old plants. Because now I can dig big holes (P16).

This participant seems to express a very goal oriented, pragmatic view on borrowing. The fact that s/he can borrow tools from the library is described as directly affecting usage and application. This enabling dimension could perhaps be interpreted as a kind of encouragement; the fact that you are able to borrow certain tools, encourages you to do the kind of work they are intended for. Some participants observe such encouragement as happening to their fellow patrons as well:

Often I'm in there, where there are people who come in there for the very first time. They've heard about the tool lending library, and that makes them wanna do do-it-yourself projects which they probably otherwise would not entertain (P7).

All participants describe their tool borrowing as mostly concerning specific applications, and that they will go to the library with an idea of what type of tool they need, most of the time. A few patrons, however, describe a more open-ended usage of the tool lending library where they are unsure as what to get:

Sometimes I'm not sure what I wanna get, so it's kind of like shopping sometimes in a weird kind of way. So I come in and I go, oh what's that, what does that do? [...] [I will] get something I've never used before and I'll play around with it (P16).

Such usage as described immediately brings the thought to the sort of discovery-oriented browsing which is well familiar in "regular" libraries.

4.3.2 Experience and learning. The theme of enablement might also be connected to knowledge, and opportunities for learning. Some participants describe how utilizing the library, and borrowing tools, has helped them develop their skills:

You learn by using something. [...] If you didn't buy it, [and] you didn't have a place to borrow it, then you might not try something, you might not learn how to do a certain repair (P14).

By this reasoning, the tool lending library enables trying things, and trying things enables learning.

Even for a professional proficient with tools, and generally knowing what type of item to get, it can still be a means to discovery and knowledge:

You can get a lot of experience with different tools that I would never have bought, and find out things about this or that brand, say, that I wouldn't otherwise have found out (P7).

At least with this participant group though, browsing does not seem to be a primary or preferred "retrieval" strategy, to continue the analogy. The borrowing of things which are in some respect new to the patron, seems to be mostly happening through consulting with staff rather than curious browsing of shelves.

Borrowing tools may also be a way to try-before-you-buy when planning a new tool purchase:

So you try to figure out, you know, get three of them instead of just one, so that we can figure out next time, which kind should we get. [...] to figure out what the best tool is, and then go buy the tool at the store, when I have a good idea of like what the best one is gonna be (P22).

These patrons seem to have developed an acquisition strategy where they will first go to the library to evaluate their options, prior to buying. In this regard the participants

do not see a conflict between hardware stores and the tool lending library, but rather the opposite. The two services can be utilized together in order to achieve the ultimate goal: getting the best tool. Further, some participants mention how tool lending library staff will sometimes refer patrons to specific hardware stores or rental businesses to get something which is not available to borrow.

4.3.3 Support of self-employment. Several of the participating professional tool users describe how the tool lending library has been invaluable for them to be able to work. In particular in the early, establishing phases of becoming self-employed, the tool lending library has helped them lower the investment threshold of acquiring the bare minimum of tools needed to be able to take on jobs:

I started when I was sixteen, so I didn't have the tools, nor did I have the money to purchase them. So, that's where the tool library came in handy. [...] I was able to get jobs because of the tool lending library (P5).

Borrowing tools for tool-dependent work may solve some of the chicken-and-egg problem of what you have to have first: money, job, or tools:

In my construction career, if you don't have the tool you can't do the job. And if you don't have the job you don't have the money to buy the tool. [...] I'm in deep gratitude to the program, it has helped me personally. [...] It's made my work possible many times (P12).

Thus, these patrons perceive the tool library as having had a direct impact on their livelihood.

4.3.4 Community support. Several patrons express clear notions of what the commonly shared borrowing resource means for their neighborhood and community:

What it allows is, people on the same block or in the same neighborhood, to wanna make improvements to their home, together, to try to maybe improve the quality of life in their neighborhood (P1).

It's doing something for the common good. [...] I think it doesn't get more community oriented than that. And they're doing good, you know. People who wouldn't otherwise be able fix up their houses or do whatever, are able to do it, even if they don't have the money (P8).

The social dimension also ties back into the instrumental acquisition of tools:

It's a practical venture, going in there, I'm going in there for a practical purpose. But it's also social, so I'm not in any hurry to do my business and rush out. So sometimes I'll just hang out and be talking to somebody, and somebody'll come in and I'll go, oh, I need one of those, do you have one of those for me? [...] I remember something that I had to do with that tool (P18).

It's an illustration of how going to the TLL can be both "social" and a "practical venture." To be social, then, is not only for the pleasantries of it; it can also be a means to discover relevant tools to borrow.

"Place" is used explicitly by some patrons when talking about the social aspects of the library and its patrons:

They're a community center in themselves, just like the grocery stores used to be community centers. You know, pool rooms, things like that, it's a place for people who need other people in the community. And so it's a meeting place (P13).

While some participants talk positively about meeting people in general at the library, others specify that they appreciate meeting others who work with their hands, and who are interested in doing similar things.

Several participants bring up that they get the impression that the tool lending library seems to attract borrowers from a variety of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. The ones who mention this talk about it as a positive:

A resource that's available not just to one group of people, I think that might be why it's so successful, because it's available to a broad spectrum of people, who might not otherwise be using a shared resource (P10).

The tool library is one of these universal mixing places, where people from the Berkeley labs come down and borrow, the thugs off the street come over and borrow, and everybody gets along (P13).

In this view, the tool lending library creates a resource which is shared across different groupings within the community, or even supports developing the community consisting of otherwise largely separated groups.

There is also the more technical or tangible side to community development: housing and other facilities actually gets built, developed, and maintained. A few participants also bring up the fact that the Bay Area is prone to earthquakes, which further motivates keeping one's housing up to standards. There may also be an economic incentive to this; several participants mention that by "retrofitting" your house according to certain ordinances and regulations, you may be eligible for tax refund. Thus, these participants talk about borrowing tools from the library as a means to several things: keeping up a nice neighborhood, taking safety precautions, and planning their tax.

5. Conclusions

5.1 *Praise and appreciation*

The participants were a heterogeneous group, expressing a range of experiences and views, both across and within the professional and hobbyist categories. Their accounts did however share one clear commonality: the strongly expressed appreciation of the tool lending library. It is evident from numerous exclamations, such as quoted in the epigraph, or as in the experience of one participant, "this is one of the most beneficial programs I've run into" (bp 11). There were only a few comments on things which might be improved, such as additional tools they wished would be offered, and the occasionally long lines and waiting times. Even such comments were typically followed up by a forgiving clause, explaining that they do not mind because they think the service is so great.

It was apparent how patrons did not seem to take the service entirely for granted. This could possibly account for some of the singular praise; patrons recognize a service such as a tool lending library as something out of the ordinary. The ability to borrow books from public libraries is well-established since generations back, possibly taken for granted as a positive right by community members. TLLs on the contrary are not part of the conceptualization of baseline rights that citizens expect society to fulfill. The residents of a city that actually does provide one perhaps therefore award it additional appreciation, seeing how most other cities do not offer it. They could see how, if things were different, they would not have one either.

5.2 *Hobbyists and professionals*

The participants' across-the-board praise suggests that the tool lending library has managed to cater to a broad spectrum of tool experience and needs. The participants ranged from inexperienced to very experienced tool users. The level of experience however did not seem to necessarily dictate to what extent they would use the tool library.

The dividing factor seemed as much to be their views on what type of tools to borrow. Among the experienced tool users were the ones who borrowed for work, the professional tool users. Some of them would borrow as much tools as they possibly could from the library. For these patrons, the tool lending library allowed them to stay ahead of the investment curve compared to if they were able to get tools only in the pace they made their income. This also partly solved the circular dilemma of how they would get the tools to perform the work to earn the money to buy the tools. They only bought tools as the utility to owning them considerably outweighed the effort of borrowing. Other experienced tool users borrowed much less from the tool library. In this group, owning your own tools was preferred, which they explained with considerations such as performance and precision, mastering the handling of an individual tool, familiarity with its history, and so on. They only borrowed tools for which these kinds of factors did not matter as much, typically heavy-duty mechanical tools for non-precision applications.

5.3 Needs and motivations

A finding which may be pertinent to understanding the participants' borrowing is how they saw it as decidedly needs based, with regards to when and why they would go to the tool library. Regardless of if factors such as weather or season actually affect tool needs and thus borrowing patterns – if you were to collect such data and look for correlations – their view is not that they borrow tools more in the summer, for example. The need for a tool is something occurring “whenever.” It is also interesting that several patrons mention “waking up in the middle of night and needing a tool” type scenarios as one of the pros to owning your own tools. A recurring notion then seems to be that participants place value in immediacy, both in terms of tool access and occasions for going to the tool library. Although some participants mention a browsing-like approach when they are not sure what exact tool they need, the library visit as such has still been prompted by a more or less articulated, application-oriented need. There was no equivalent mentioned of going to the library on a whim just to see if they find anything interesting.

The expressed motivations for borrowing tools from the library, instead of getting them by other means, seem to cover a fairly broad spectrum of ideas – from strictly personal to more generalized, sometimes altruistic explanations. Furthermore, these expressed motivations can vary from what would appear as rationally calculated considerations to the more emotionally framed. It may be that it is not always such a stringent, clear-cut decision-making process, “should I buy or should I borrow item X?” It is not necessarily about declaring the best choice after rational consideration of relevant parameters. While such instrumentality surely plays some part for most borrowers, there are also other factors and strategies involved. Several respondents explained their borrowing with how it simply “makes sense” (see Section 5.4 below) without specifying much further. This may not always correspond to an item-by-item decision but rather a general tendency toward borrowing. It may well be a practice which has started out as rational and gradually becomes habitual; borrowing has perhaps become the default means of tool acquisition for some patrons.

5.4 Borrowing as common sense

The findings regarding ideological standpoint were highly interesting. Only a few participants expressed notions of alternative lifestyle, environmental issues, opposition of “commercial forces,” and the like. Instead, they talked of what makes sense and not, holding that borrowing makes sense. A possible interpretation is that it represents a

sort of common-sense tenet of not letting things go to waste. Being wasteful, in this understanding, does not necessarily (only) tie into concerns for the environmental impact of production and consumption. The sense ascribed to not being wasteful, could likewise be tied into some moral ideal of, for example decency: it is not decent to be wasteful; it is decent to save, to share. Underlying socio-psychological reasoning is of course beyond this study. The point is just to exert caution when interpreting the expressed notions, so as not to force the issue of ideology.

Further, the notion expressed by several participants that it's what the library is for, as opposed to getting tools from friends and family, is potentially pertinent to the societal role of library services. The infrastructure for systematic borrowing provided by public libraries enables an equitable means of acquisition which does not depend on your status – social, financial, or otherwise. Having a library card is the only requirement, and it makes sense to be able to utilize this kind of service.

5.5 Concluding remarks: sustainable community development

Potentially, these findings regarding community members' tool borrowing from the public library could be discussed further in a context of sustainable development. Several points of entry have been provided. Three are briefly discussed here.

First, the notion that the tool lending library helps people improve life in their neighborhood. Patrons saw the service as something which directly supports them and their peers in their everyday lives. A resource lending tools for free not only allows, but invites and encourages, people to work on their homes. The patrons seem to regard their tool borrowing as pertaining to community building in both the figurative and the literal. For example, the notion that borrowing tools from the library aids the upkeep of earthquake safe housing, illustrates the relevance of looking at the relationship between community resilience and public libraries (Grace and Sen, 2013).

Second, borrowing tools for paid work as support to become self-employed. Participants recounted stories of how the tool lending library has been instrumental for them being able to start and run their own businesses. This perception, that a public library has directly affected their employment situation, ties into both social and economic dimensions of sustainable development on the local level.

Third, the knowledge aspect. Learning and acquiring skills by using a public service, could potentially be framed as popular education, or community learning (Siddike *et al.*, 2014). By borrowing tools from the library, patrons learn tool usage by doing. In the views of the patrons, this particular library service helps them develop the skills needed to maintain and improve their homes and gardens, and to perform paid work.

The idea of sustainable community development, with particular interest in the sharing of resources, is not new (Berkes, 1989). Likewise, the notion of public libraries as centers for sustainable community development (Edwards *et al.*, 2013, chapter 10) is increasingly prevalent, though the issue of borrowing is largely overlooked or marginalized. As has been shown in the present case study, participants connect their borrowing mainly to local rather than global issues of development. Also, their focus seems to be on social and economic dimensions rather than environmental. It is important however not to overreach the interpretation. The notion of "community" is often referred to rather uncritically and normatively, romanticized as something inherently good, charged with emotion and ideology (Blackshaw, 2010). Accordingly, the potential of community to positively impact and drive sustainable development is typically a founding assumption from the outset of any discussion, rather than something which is approached openly and critically (Hauxwell-Baldwin, 2013).

What a case study such as this can serve to show, is an exploration of how library patrons' perception of their borrowing can be conceptually connected to some aspects of community development and sustainability. Identifying any causal relations between borrowing and societal development, and whether the result is "sustainable," would warrant further study.

This paper has focused on patrons' perception of their tool borrowing – how they motivate it, what role and meaning they see to it. Patrons' accounts of the social aspects of utilizing the tool lending library have only been partly introduced here. Subsequent publications, combining the perspectives of TLL staff, managers, and patrons, will extend the discussion by also focusing on the library and the service provided. Central aspects will be the TLL as a community service, and the social relations between and among patrons and staff. What role is the library and its staff seen as having in patrons' borrowing, their learning, and the development of their community?

Notes

1. "Consuming life" is of course in reference to Bauman's (2007) title.
2. Wiegand credits Zweigig (1973) as the original source of the notion.
3. The survey study will be reported in a future paper.

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