What kind of services supply to the poor? A survey directed toward homeless
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Abstract
Purpose – The Bibliothèque Publique d’information (Bpi), a large public reference library, located inside the Centre Pompidou in Paris, welcomes visitors from students to professionals and including the homeless community. In order to precisely diagnose the situation, the Bpi asked the French sociologist Serge Paugam to conduct a study of all these poorly housed or homeless users (refugees, migrants, people with mental health issues, etc.). This paper seeks to address these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was based on participant observations and in-depth interviews throughout a six-month period of time.

Findings – Paugam looks upon social downgrading as a process and he distinguishes three steps he calls “Fragility”, “Dependency”, and “Rupture”. His hypothesis stated that the three stages of this process should be observed in the library. This was proved to be true. Moreover, the survey finding showed there are links between the stage of the process where people happen to be and their uses of the library.

Originality/value – This is the first French study directed toward homeless library users. It shows that although a public library welcomes everyone, social inequalities do not disappear. The survey finding confirms the diversity of the public, even among those users with poor living conditions, and the difficulty to offer services relevant to everybody, in a large public library such as the Bpi. Should the library offer the same set of activities to all those it serves? Or should it target specific groups of users and operate programs to meet their specific needs?

Keywords Library users, Public libraries, Social inclusion, Surveys

Paper type Research paper

The Bibliothèque Publique d’information (Bpi) is a large public reference library, located inside the Centre Pompidou in Paris. It makes available to its users a lot of materials and services, free of charge and highly accessible without ID or membership. The Bpi records 5,000 entries per day. Our library welcomes visitors from students to professionals and including the homeless community.

Though our previous surveys show a well identified population of homeless Bpi users, there is a large array of other users with poor living conditions (Evans et al., 2000), like young adult Afghan refugees, who are also frequent users of the Bpi. In order to precisely diagnose the situation, the Bpi asked the French sociologist Serge Paugam to conduct a study of all these poorly housed or homeless users (refugees, migrants,
people with mental health issues, etc.). The goal of this survey was to collect data about habits, needs and demands of these users. The study was based on participant observations and in-depth interviews throughout a six-month period. Serge Paugam’s team thoroughly investigated some Bpi areas such as newspapers or multimedia areas; places heavily frequented by homeless (Paugam and Giorgetti, 2013).

Paugam looks upon social downgrading as a process and he distinguishes three steps. The first one he calls “Fragility”. At this stage, people think they can overcome their difficulties by themselves. They dislike the idea of applying for welfare, because they do not want to feel dependent. On the contrary, at the stage Paugam calls “Dependancy”, people rely on welfare, having lost hope to get a job, and go along with this new status. But they still have social connections, which is not the case at the third stage, which Paugam calls “Rupture”. At this stage, with no welfare assistance, people suffer social isolation and exclusion.

Paugam’s hypothesis stated that the three stages of this process should be observed in the library. This was proved to be true. Moreover, the survey finding showed there are links between the stage of the process where people happen to be and their uses of the library. Paugam and his team focused their study on three points: expectations about the library, behaviour towards other users and behaviour towards library rules.

At the first step (Fragility), people tend to use the library as a working place where they can enhance their abilities to overcome unemployment. They appreciate this opportunity all the more since the library is not a social agency and since they think it would be a stigma to be on welfare. On the contrary, acting as a patron of a famous cultural institution such as the Centre Pompidou enhances their self-esteem. They are very respectful of the library rules and policies and tend to criticise other people who are not, or people who use the library just for leisure, especially people whose social status is obviously lower. As they try to hide their own difficulties, they do not want to be mixed up with them.

For people who happened to be at stage two (Rupture), the Bpi is mostly looked upon as a daily pastime. Like the former group of users, they set high value on being a Bpi patron, but their expectations are quite different. The library provides them many materials and services for their leisure (such as TV, newspapers, access to the internet, etc.) but, first of all, it provides them a place to live. In most cases, they come every day, all day long, often sitting on the same seat, eventually meeting people. The “Worldwide Televisions” area, where free access to foreign TV channels is provided, gives us a good example of this phenomenon. Every day, the same group of patrons gathers in this area, more or less claiming it as its territory. This small community has its leaders and its own rules, sometimes a bit different from the library rules. For instance, it is difficult for them to keep silent. Paugam shows that they tend to negotiate official rules, trying to make acceptable a less formal and more collective way of using the services of the library.

As I said before, the library also welcomes homeless who explicitly act out their difficulties. They are at the stage Paugam calls “Social rupture”. Their needs are mostly basic, such as finding a warm place in winter, a seat to relax or a free access to a restroom. However, a variety of situations and behaviours can be observed among this population, more or less consistent with library rules and policies. According to Paugam, “the main difference between Dependency and Rupture deals with the ability to hold one’s own in public places”. At the stage he calls “Rupture”, it may be very difficult to stay for long in a public place such as the Bpi.
Generally speaking, those users do not question the library policies, nor try to obey them, being more or less aware it would be difficult for them to observe those rules. For instance one of our rules is “drunk or visually dirty people, who behave as nuisances for other users or staff, are not admitted in the library”. Actually, this rule is mildly enforced: the access to the library is not barred but, as I said before, the main problem for homeless is to stay for long in the library. The survey reports that some homeless, well aware they might be a nuisance for other users, try to escape the threat of penalty such as exclusion by means of various tactics, sitting for instance in remote areas. Their challenge is to work out the limit to the point where their behaviour is acceptable in the Bpi. If so, they find their place in the library, and may become regular patrons everybody knows: “our homeless” as Holt and Holt (2010) call them. This reminds us of the “in-group deviant” described by Professor Goffman (1963), who:

[... ] welds others into a participating circle even while it strips him of some of the status of a participant. He serves as a mascot for the group although qualified in certain ways to be a normal member of it.

Paugam rightly notes that although the Bpi welcomes everyone, social inequalities do not disappear. The survey findings confirms the diversity of our public, even among those users with poor living conditions. It makes us once more aware of the difficulty to offer services relevant to everybody, in a library which records 5,000 entries a day. Should we uphold our traditional policy, which proved to be successful, and offer the same set of activities to all those we serve? The Bpi was designed for a so-called “self-sufficient user”: materials and services are highly accessible without librarians’ help and our previous surveys report that most users enjoy the freedom this policy gives them. But we can see there are glaring demands which are not fulfilled. Should we target specific groups of users and operate programs to meet their specific needs? The Bpi is beginning to do so: for instance the library initiated a partnership with a non profit organization in order to give information on available help and support to young Afghan migrant users.

But Paugam’s survey warns us not to go too far in this direction. The main virtue of the Bpi for the populations he observed is its democratic character: they appreciate the fact that the library is a public institution open to everybody and not a social agency reserved for people in need. So Paugam thinks we should not develop too many programs targeting those specific users. Doing so would risk altering the specific character of the library, which is: welcoming everybody on the basis of equality for all.

I agree with him that we do have to preserve the democratic character of the library, but I think we should make sure we are not putting off users or potential users with a more and more standardised offer. For instance, we know by experience some pernicious effects of technical changes: we used to provide our users with numerous video tapes which were heavily used by elderly patrons, often foreign and illiterate. This collection is now available on computers and, according to our surveys and mere observations, this change discouraged many of those previous users. So I think we should take into account specific needs and specific groups of users when we are planning changes in the Bpi, which is the case at the moment, in order to preserve the most important value of the library, which is its audience.
References


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