Case Study Research Critique


*Research Summary*

In 1999, Doran and Preston conducted a case study of the town of Portadown, Northern Ireland, which has been divided along religious, political and socio-economic lines for decades. The researchers wanted to examine the relationship between the public library service and the local community. The research instrument was a case study approach utilizing carefully structured one-hour interviews with local community groups and library staff. The goal of the research was to gain a clearer understanding of the role of the public library in this volatile and divided community. The researchers concluded that social and political barriers did exist in Portadown and this prevented the public library service from being used by all members of the community. Thus, the underrepresented populations had set up their own community information centers as an alternative to the public library service.

*In-depth Critique*

*Research Problem*

There is a history of distrust between the catholic and protestant communities of the town of Portadown and this bled into the view of the public library service. To combat this, the researchers traveled to four community centers, a local high school, and various library locations, and employed a carefully structured interview guide. The goal
was to hear from both library users and non-users. The researchers wanted to assure the participants that they did not have an agenda and that the interviews were confidential. They were interested in understanding the issue, not comparing views of individual subjects. However, the researchers do not give the total number of participants who attended the community group meetings or a breakdown of their religious affiliation, age, gender, socio-economic status, education level, employment status, etc. The only thing we are given are the names of community organizers who were interviewed who are the spokespeople of their communities and express the general views of their communities.

**Literature Review**

Literature from 1974 through 1998 was reviewed representing limited information specific to Northern Ireland and the relationship between public libraries and the communities they serve. The researchers chose to widen the search to general literature on community librarianship and the nature of library service and outreach to socially disadvantaged groups. Findings included the idea that political violence and social disadvantage go hand in hand, the concept that libraries are seen as bureaucratic which is the antithesis of responsiveness, librarians being uneasy about politicization of the library, and the role of library neutrality which was often seen as a bogus concept. The researchers had difficulty in defining community especially when it relates to Northern Ireland as only one local library literature was found relating directly to the “troubles.” The literature review was limited to the United Kingdom. If the researchers had expanded their net to include other areas of the world, the Middle East, for example, perhaps they would have found other studies that relate to the question they were exploring. What about Israel and Palestine? Are any public libraries in that part of the
world situated in opposing communities? Liisi Lembinen, one of my group members, also pointed out the parallel between the experience of African-Americans during the civil rights era and their relationship to their local public library service, perhaps there is literature on this topic.

Theoretical Framework

Since the researchers were treading on new territory, the interviews were of more of an exploratory nature rather than specific.

Research Design & Data Gathering

For the purposes of this research problem and preliminary gathering of data, a case study model was appropriate as it allowed a broad base of views to be represented, including civic groups, community groups, library employees. The opinions expressed would judge whether the library service matched the community’s expectation. One problem that became evident was the fact that some participants may be reluctant to voice their opinions in front of others from their community because of fear of repercussions. Ashley Navarro, one of my group, noted in discussion, that a survey would have been a useful tool to use, sent to all 21,000 inhabitants of Portadown to get a better idea of what the community really thinks about the library. The survey would potentially elicit truthful responses and give the respondent complete anonymity. There would not be any peer-pressure involved. Nevertheless, the interviews garnered satisfactory responses, although much of the information seems to have been gathered from local community representatives who admitted that if they were to try to have a better relationship with their counterpart on the other side they would be viewed as traitors in their own communities.
The case study approach succeeded and appears to have made available responses from all sides of the political, social, and religious divide. Some individuals interviewed felt that the location of the library was a problem and so did not visit. They expressed their belief that the town center location exposed them to violence as they felt it was not safe to venture downtown on a Saturday in broad daylight so had built their own local community centers. Some of the librarians interviewed were okay with this fact and felt no need in conducting an outreach program and were not interested in helping the community and were quite happy for the library to remain a book lending service. It would have been nice to know how many librarians were interviewed to discover the percentage of librarians who held this belief. Does this sentiment reflect a general consensus or is it held by a few? The same goes for those that feel they cannot enter the town center without fear of violence. What percentage of those interviewed felt this way? This is one of the problems with this article. The authors appear to have left out how many people were interviewed? What was the breakdown, equal numbers from each community or an unbalanced number? Perhaps they have this information and just left it out of the article. This seems to be a problem in their methodology.

Conclusions

The researchers found that one issue was the location of the public library so 1 million pounds sterling was found to build a new library in a new location that would serve all of the community. The local library board did not want to build two libraries, one for Catholics and one for Protestants.
The researchers acknowledge that Portadown is a critical case and that the results of this study should not be viewed as the situation in Northern Ireland as a whole. They also understand that the views of the various community groups are not free of manipulation. However, the results do show that the Portadown public library was not providing adequate service to all of the communities it served. They found there was a bias. Many socially disadvantaged community members were underserved.

Critique Conclusions

Since the local population of Portadown is so firmly separated along religious and political divides, and since most of the interviews were held in community centers, and not one-on-one, it is clear that the truth may have been illusive. Geographically it seems obvious that Catholics would not want to go to the protestant area of town where the public library is situated. It is also clear that no-where inside the town is neutral ground. This problem of the role of the public library in a divided community does not appear to be specific to Northern Ireland but can be related to other areas of the world. It would have been interesting to see if the researchers could have found other case studies outside of the United Kingdom. The case study approach is a good choice of methodology but could have incorporated a survey perhaps as a hand out in the local newspaper to reach the entire population of Portadown.