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Libraries Build Autonomy: A Philosophical Perspective on the Social Role of Libraries and Librarians

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Introduction

An important, overlooked moral contribution of libraries and librarians to the community is the provision of support for autonomy. Philosophers have long considered autonomy a primary moral value, essential to living a flourishing life. Although library scholarship has not often engaged deeply with the philosophical discourse surrounding autonomy, libraries and librarians are uniquely positioned to enact many of the methods for encouraging it. (A notable exception is Rosenzweig's 2004 article in *Progressive Librarian*.) By considering the moral significance of library services as autonomy-building activities, libraries and librarians can provide a valuable social support for their communities, individual users, and ultimately themselves.

In the first section, I will address the definitions of autonomy in the context of public libraries. Autonomy is not a synonym for independence, but is rather "the moral capacity to make one's own choices" (Verkerk, 291), formed within society and relationships. Secondly, I will demonstrate that autonomy is already an underlying if little-recognized value held by libraries, and third, explain how libraries and librarians can, and in many cases already do, support autonomy-building.

This support is primarily found in social activities, from a brief consult at the reference desk to an ongoing gaming night. Finally, I will argue that appreciating the moral significance of library services as opportunities to build autonomy will have a concrete benefit for the library: it will allow us to clearly understand and market the unique and important role libraries and librarians can and should play.

What is autonomy in the context of libraries?

At its most simplistic, autonomy is self-governance. Am I able to live my life in accordance with my own personal values, and not those thrust upon me by others? In a Western context, this question conjures up many of our deeply-held beliefs in freedom, independence, and individualism. However, as

we consider library services through the lens of autonomy, it is critical that we do not confuse these concepts. Autonomy is not the same as independence or individualism.

Philosophers have engaged in much debate over the subtleties, limits, and role of autonomy in our lives, yet they agree on essentially the same definition. Instead of emphasizing independence or self-sufficiency, the incorrect idea "that a good [autonomous] life is a life in which we do not need help or support from anyone in meeting our needs and carrying out our life plan," autonomy focuses on "the moral capacity to make one's own choices" (Verkerk, 291). (See Christman for an overview of autonomy scholarship and a bibliography of important works. My definitions are rooted in the feminist tradition of relational autonomy, best exemplified through Mackenzie and Stolijar, Meyers, and Verkerk.) Thus, encouraging autonomy is not antithetical to building community and social capital, as Ronald McCabe insinuates (McCabe, 121). Interdependence is actually integral to autonomy, as we often rely on the help of others to carry out the decisions we make based on our own values. In the context of libraries, the librarian's care is therefore critical in helping patrons develop autonomy.

Consider a physically impaired patron who is able to make his own decisions about which websites to visit, but is unable to manipulate the mouse in order to access them without the librarian's aid. The librarian's helping hand increases his ability to make his own choices based on his personal values. The librarian can play a similar role in encouraging the growth of autonomy in children and teenagers, the elderly and homebound, and other dependent patrons. In short, increasing autonomy in the library setting is not about reducing a person's dependence on or exposure to the librarian in the name of self-sufficiency. It is about recognizing the ability of the librarian-as-caretaker to help a moral agent carry out his or her decisions.

Even apparently independent adults are not perfectly autonomous in every situation (Meyers, 624), so it is extremely important to remember that it is not only children and disabled patrons who can benefit from the autonomy-building support of the library and the librarian. Anybody may need encouragement and support in this realm. Yet because each person's autonomy needs are unique, there is no one-size-fits-all method for meeting them. Librarians and library services must meet people where they are. This individualized approach requires a personal, caring relationship with the librarian. Again, relationships with librarians are central to building autonomy.

Autonomy recognizes the importance of interrelationships not only between individuals, but also between the individual and social institutions and norms (McLeod, 260). As a major social institution, the library itself plays an important role in developing autonomy. For example, the physically impaired have been historically oppressed by socialization which emphasizes physical independence, turning their impairments into cause for discrimination and shame. Not only are they functionally oppressed by systems arbitrarily biased towards the able-bodied, their autonomy may be reduced as they internalize the dominant message that they are less valuable. By consciously and publicly rejecting this social norm through prioritizing autonomy over self-sufficiency, the library can help dismantle the oppressive socialization which causes people to experience and internalize differences as social disabilities. If the library does not take autonomy seriously as it designs services, it can unconsciously perpetuate this and other forms of commonly accepted oppressive social assumptions.

We have seen that autonomy is not total independence, but rather the ability of an individual to make life choices guided by his or her own values. To provide morally significant care, libraries must avoid unconsciously reinforcing the autonomy-reducing notion that seemingly-independent people are also fully autonomous (thereby perhaps depriving them of important care) while

dependent people are largely heteronymous (and therefore providing paternalistic care which does not acknowledge their moral right and ability to make their own choices). While technologies and social norms which encourage patrons to work independently may at times increase autonomy, the consistent availability of care from the librarian is irreplaceable.

Why is autonomy important in libraries?

I argue that libraries already value autonomy, although we do not often recognize it as such. I will support this by demonstrating that building autonomy lies at the heart of our most cherished missions and services. Even though much unspoken support for autonomy-building already exists, consciously recognizing autonomy as one of our most fundamental values is still critical. Doing so will help librarians and libraries make morally significant choices about services, consciously maximizing social benefit and human flourishing.

When we attempt to articulate the value-add libraries provide, we often speak in terms of services. However, these are instrumental values. They matter not in themselves, but as methods of supporting our intrinsic values. Even a library's fundamental service, providing access to information, is ultimately an instrumental value which supports the intrinsic value of autonomy.

Access to information is instrumentally valuable. Many value access because it supports democracy by encouraging democratic ideals and an informed citizenry. However, even democracy itself is not a core value. We value it because we believe it creates the best climate for us to live what we consider a flourishing life. To thrive, we believe we must have the latitude to engage with "considerations, desires, conditions, and characteristics that are not simply imposed externally upon one, but are part of what can somehow be considered one's authentic self" (Christman). We value democracy (and therefore access to information) instrumentally for the flexibility it gives us to make our own moral choices based on our own values – to be autonomous.

Notice that "supporting democracy" and "providing access to information" are among the most common library mission statements. Like these, nearly all library missions function at an instrumental level which can be reduced to support for the intrinsic value of autonomy. "Providing education", for example, is important not because of the innate value of any particular fact, but because learning about the choices and value systems available to us is critical to autonomy.

Even providing recreational materials is essential for the exercise of autonomy. It is an acknowledgement that we believe in people's agency to choose for themselves what to read, and a reaction again the old paternalistic idea that the library should ensure that people read only the "good" books we select for them. Instead of attempting to force people to read politics and science, the library now happily provides a wide variety of fiction and nonfiction, respecting people's right to choose their own reading materials based on their own values. Autonomy is the underlying theme, the uniting thread, running through each of these common library missions. Though we have rarely openly defined it as such, autonomy is one of the library's core values.

What are the practical applications of autonomy-building?

As one might expect based on this philosophical alignment, the library's services already generally support autonomy. However, since we often fail to make this value explicit, we are not doing the best possible job of helping our patrons flourish. By using the framework of autonomy competency we can concretely examine how library activities already encourage autonomy and

where they might improve. My analysis will conclude that social activities, even those generally considered less central to the library's educational/democratic missions, are in fact among the most morally significant services the library offers.

In order to understand autonomy competency, it is critical to recognize that autonomy is not all-or-nothing attribute (Meyers, 624-6). It is something we possess in greater or lesser degrees, and is fluid based on a variety of factors. Individuals have different levels of autonomy, but even the same person may express varying amounts in particular times or situations. From Diana Meyers, the originator of the idea of autonomy competency, I have distilled five competencies employed in the exercise of autonomy: access to information about many life possibilities, self-reflection, critical thinking, self-worth, and willingness/ability to act. By recognizing and encouraging each of these skills, the library can help any patron become more autonomous. (Some authors, like McLeod, differentiate between self-esteem, self-trust, self-confidence, and self-worth. While these distinctions are valid, they are not within the scope of this paper. I will use these terms synonymously.)

Most public libraries already address nearly all of the capacities I have listed to some degree. Access to information has the clearest correlation. In order for a person to autonomously choose a way of life, he must understand it fully and know what alternatives exist. Knowing that autonomy is deeply dependent on intellectual freedom can only redouble our dedication to this already beloved principle. However, I believe that we must think beyond the provision of books and electronic resources, the importance of which we already recognize. Libraries are social places where people from many walks of life gather to learn, play, and interact. Bridging social capital, or loose connections between people from largely separate social circles (Putnam, 23), is one important way of learning about modes of living other than our own. Social activities which bring many kinds of people together are morally important in building autonomy, and therefore part of the library's primary priority even if they have little connection to literacy.

Building critical thinking is related to the library's educational mission. Once a person discovers a variety of options, making an autonomous choice among them requires the ability to clearly evaluate their merits and shortcomings. Many libraries formally encourage critical thinking skills through classes, discussion groups, and lectures. Librarians support it informally by teaching patrons how to search for and evaluate information. I argue that the most effective of these activities are again social. Critical thinking is a skill which must be practiced, and a social event can provide regular opportunity and reinforcement. Interactions such as book groups or reference interviews allow people to analyze ideas, articulate those analyses, and receive validation. Recognizing that these activities have a deep moral importance, and are not simply of practical use, should encourage an expansion of social programs which build critical thinking in the library.

Self-reflection is an extension of critical thinking; it is the application of that logical process to one's own state. We are all certainly susceptible to thinking clearly about external issues while failing to examine our own. Yet autonomy requires making choices rooted in our personal values; without self-knowledge, a person cannot decide which option best reflects his. There are not many way the library can directly promote self-reflection, but the library can indirectly influence it by emphasizing the social context of critical thinking. Talking out ideas with others, rather than mulling them over in our own heads, helps us gain perspective. Learning about others and forming trusting relationships also helps us to think and talk about ourselves. Thus, I believe that social critical thinking activities are also the library's best opportunity for encouraging autonomy through self-reflection.

Willingness / ability to act and self-worth are the final two criteria, and I

find them indivisible. Even if a person recognizes that her life could be improved, she will not be able to affect change unless she believes she deserves it. Without self-worth, there is no will to act; “autonomy is dependent on self-trust” (McLeod, 261). Individuals from historically oppressed groups, particularly women and girls, frequently struggle with self-esteem issues and are thus disproportionately autonomy-impaired. Building self-worth is almost purely social, even more so than the other competencies. Even the best-adjusted of us thrive on appreciation; a person deficient in self-esteem will need the approval of valued others to build approval for herself.

Librarians often build patrons’ self-worth through such small, frequent gestures that we forget their importance and power. Empowering a young girl to select the books she likes, encouraging her in whatever intellectual or recreational direction she chooses, and respecting her privacy and judgment are services librarians offer daily and almost thoughtlessly. However, the power these actions have to increase that girl’s self-trust and therefore her autonomy is tremendous. The simple act of helping somebody take responsibility, whether it is helping a child select a book, assisting a disabled patron, or showing an adult how to use the online catalog, is a morally significant way of increasing that person’s self-esteem and thus autonomy. It is wonderful that librarians already do this daily; we should also do it consciously and intentionally, never forgetting its moral value in addition to its practical and professional ones.

Scheduled social programs can also play a role in developing autonomy through self-worth. They offer a venue for patrons to “express [their] own opinions and feelings, [which] has a lot to do with trusting your own judgment” (McLeod, 266). Furthermore, strong social networks can help people build the self-esteem they need to feel that they have the ability to act. Even a person who has decided on a change and feels she deserves the improvement cannot enact it unless she feels that she is capable of doing so. The support of a social group concretely increases her ability to act. Loose connections are known to help people find new jobs (Granovetter, 1371), while close connections can offer a shoulder to cry on, a sounding board (also beneficial for self-reflection), or even a place to sleep for a few nights.

This analysis shows us that the library is already in a position to nurture autonomy in all types of patrons. Its services and philosophy are well aligned with the elements of autonomy. Recognizing autonomy’s importance does not require a significant change in the library’s services – only in its perception of the significance and role of those services. The most salient example is that of social activities. Social but non-literary events are not secondary to the library’s values, as some mission statements might lead us to believe; they play a primary role in autonomy competency.

How can embracing autonomy revolutionize the way people perceive the library?

The autonomy perspective makes clear the unique value of the librarian as caretaker. Yet its greatest benefit for the library is more profound. It establishes a clear, unique role of libraries in society. Often, libraries fail to effectively market themselves to users and to policymakers because they cannot succinctly articulate why they are uniquely important. Libraries suffer from a “problem of purpose” (Williams), and therefore a problem of marketing. Throughout American library history, we have engaged in “a continual pattern of enthusiastic announcement of new goals, followed by gradual disillusionment and the eventual abandonment of these goals in favor of others.” (Schlipf, 272). If we cannot consistently agree on what the nature of our distinctive, enduring role in society might be, how can we ever be expected to impress the value of that role on the community?

The problem is not the goal itself; it is the paradigm of defining our

value through mission. The way we have conceived of the library's mission has changed over time, and is far from agreed-upon in modern scholarship. It is an issue that may never be resolved, as the library adapts to new social needs, new technologies, and new ideas. I argue that it should not be resolved. To remain relevant, libraries must have the flexibility to adapt their missions to the needs of their communities, as they have always done. Yet they must also demonstrate enduring value. Mission cannot serve both purposes simultaneously, and it is better suited to the first. Demonstrating enduring value is accomplished not through mission, but through moral perspective.

Building autonomy is not a mission, but a moral perspective from which missions may be derived. As I demonstrated in Section II, autonomy is at the root of many of our major missions: supporting democracy, encouraging lifelong education, and providing recreation. The same should hold true for all other library missions, extant and future. Whatever the relevant goal for the times, the library unswervingly supports the fundamental right of people to make choices based their own values, and recognizes its obligation to help people build the ability to do so. No other institution, public or private, can say the same. As times change, the library may choose to act on this moral perspective in various ways; these methods are the library's mission, and they are free to change to reflect the times and the community. However, the library's core, unique value of encouraging autonomy will remain unassailable and easily communicated.

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