Libraries at the Crossroads
Resolving Identities

EMEA REGIONAL COUNCIL MEETING
BERLIN 21-22 FEB. 2017

#EMEARC17
Information seeking and/or identity seeking: libraries as sources of cultural identity

Szabolcs Dancs
Identity: a linguistic approach

"the binary opposition is the means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined against what it is not"

/Ferdinand de Saussure/

|| Human beings define themselves against others
The role of information in constructing identity

Binary oppositions

• based on the knowledge acquired through socialization
• can be (very) superficial or (very) sophisticated depending on the \textit{quantity} and \textit{quality} of the information we use

Refined distinction

• requires collecting and adopting \textit{information sufficient} (in quality and quantity)

\rightarrow \textit{constructing a cultural identity}
Human aggression and seeking identity

"Humans possess all the necessary biological tools to keep in check aggression within the community they regard as their own. At the same time, there are practically no biological checks on aggression against groups regarded as foreign. What they do have is cultural checks, provided these have been acquired through individual development and socialization."

/Vilmos Csányi, Hungarian ethologist/
Identity and access to cultural heritage

"Heritage could be the mirror of self-knowledge … my tradition is not equal with me, I am the work that I have made on this tradition, with this tradition."

/Péter Esterházy/

work with tradition = constructing cultural identity
(= personal process of socialization)
Cultural identity in libraries I.

"The Fourth International UNESCO Memory of the World Conference … Urges all Member States to: recognize the role and value of documentary heritage of all kinds in the formation of cultural, national and other identities."

Cultural identity in libraries II.

"In addressing cultural and linguistic diversity, library services are driven by their commitment to the principles of fundamental freedoms and equity of access to information and knowledge for all, in the respect of cultural identity and values."

/IFLA/UNESCO Multicultural Library Manifesto (2012)/
Cultural identity in libraries III.

"In the long history of libraries, lending is a modern invention. The role of the library as a meeting place was much more important, and is often overlooked today. And above all, libraries played a central role in integration and identity formation… It is through meeting the literature, but above all, meeting other people, that a new identity can be formed. Libraries offer a completely essential key for this language."

/Anders Rydell/
Issues for (re)consideration I.

• Should libraries play a role much more active than they have played so far in the area?
• How could a new approach focusing on self-knowledge and cultural identity influence our services and collections? What impact might it have on information seeking practices at all?
• Can we define a standard for creating group identity for instance by involving or integrating tools and experiences from the area of psychology or – more concretely – bibliotherapy?
Issues for (re)consideration II.

• How can we support our patrons to work with their tradition/to work on their tradition (as worded by Péter Esterházy), i.e. to create their own cultural identity?

• Do we need to filter information more intensively than we have done? to choose relevant information of high quality? could it be the new task for librarians as curators in a society model where persons are supposed to be more and more independent in information seeking?

• Or could we “just” encourage critical thinking? (of customers or librarians?)

• Should we contribute to the socialization of individuals?
Linking data – linking people I.

A national library perspective

• creating common narratives by building international digital libraries using international authority files
  – language-independent access points (using timelines or map displays) to bridge language gaps
  – projects involving historians, culture experts and bibliotherapists to build a shared digital corpus and design specific tools for research
  – establishing a comprehensive methodology for developing international digital libraries supporting cultural identity
Linking data – linking people II.

• implementing culturally-affirming bibliotherapy (ethnobibliotherapy) to enhance multicultural awareness and development of cultural identity
  – creating methodology to foster individual’s sense of cultural identity
    • identifying and adopting best practices
    • selecting texts appropriate to construct cultural identity
    • compiling a curriculum containing recommendations for using literary works for bibliotherapy purposes
Some good instances?

• **Living Library methodology:**
  – “primary aim is to create constructive personal dialogues between people who would normally not have the opportunity to speak to each other and thus challenge common prejudices and stereotypes”
  – focuses rather on integration and multicultural dialogue than improving self-knowledge

• **Culture-Centered Bibliotherapy in ESL Curriculum Design:**
  – embracing cultural sensitivity, evidenced by culturally informed teaching and curricular transformation, to improve diverse students’ academic performance
  – affirms beneficial influences of bibliotherapy (and literature at all) in improving students’ self-esteem and cultural identity
Responsive libraries

- **Responding! Public libraries and refugees:**
  - a document by IFLA
  - “As we have watched the refugee crisis unfold in Europe we have been flooded with examples of how public libraries have responded in practical and heartfelt ways.”

- **Public Libraries in Europe Welcome Refugees:**
  - a website by EBLIDA collecting links to news and stories about library activities concerned
Thanks for attention!
Sources


[http://ibrarian.net/navon/paper/Culture_Centered_Bibliotherapy_1_Running_Head__C_U.pdf?paperid=17641075, accessed 2 August 2016]

Don't judge a book by its cover! The Living Library Organiser's Guide 2011

Esterházy Péter: A vereség
[http://hvg.hu/itthon/201451_estehazy_peter_urizalasrol_hagyomanyokrol_, accessed 27 July 2016]

IFLA/UNESCO Multicultural Library Manifesto, 2012

Public Libraries in Europe Welcome Refugees

Responding! Public libraries and refugees, 2015