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Social infrastructuring in public libraries: librarians' continuous care in everyday library practice

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Abstract

Purpose – As social infrastructures, public libraries are increasingly recognised as providing more than access to books and information; librarians' work is importantly centred around practices of care. However, the ways in which they provide care is poorly researched, let alone conceptualised. This paper explores how this important part of librarians' daily work is practiced through the lens of infrastructuring.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper first theoretically discusses the concepts of social infrastructuring, care and tinkering. Then, it turns to ethnographic research conducted in the public library networks of three European cities: Vienna (Austria), Rotterdam (the Netherlands) and Malmö (Sweden). The paper comprises empirical materials from all three countries and unpacks 16 librarians' daily working routines of care through participant observations.

Findings – The empirical analysis resulted in three modes of social infrastructuring in public libraries: (1) maintaining, (2) building connections and (3) drawing boundaries. Practices of care are prominent in each of these infrastructuring modes: librarians infrastructure the library with and via their care practices. Whilst care practices are difficult to quantify and verbalise, they are valuable for library patrons. By using the concept of tinkering, the article conceptualises librarians' infrastructuring enactments as crucial community-building aspects of libraries.

Originality/value – By focusing on the enactment of social infrastructuring, the paper goes beyond a descriptive approach to understanding public libraries as important social infrastructures. Rather, the paper unpacks how libraries come into being as infrastructuring agencies by highlighting what librarians do and say. Our international study articulates the importance of care practices in public libraries across different national contexts.

Keywords Public libraries, Social infrastructuring, Care, Community librarians, Participant observations, Austria, The Netherlands, Sweden

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Public libraries are increasingly recognised as not only providing access to literature and culture but also as important meeting places (e.g. Aabø *et al.*, 2010; Audunson *et al.*, 2020; Buschman, 2005). The notion of the library as place has evolved and expanded over time,

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and its roles and functions have transitioned from traditional to a more diverse range of activities (Kawamoto and Koizumi, 2022). The withdrawal of physical public services in many Western countries has resulted in a growing demand on libraries and their staff to assist people with social services, for example, communication with authorities concerning financial, legal and medical matters (Dalmer *et al.*, 2022; Michnik, 2018). This can be seen as a "relocation of care responsibility" from welfare institutions to the public library (Power and Williams, 2019, 7). Furthermore, in times of hardship, more people may find themselves in insecure conditions of housing, food, or heat supply and turn to libraries for support and shelter as it is one of few places open to the public without any obligation to consume (Thiele, 2022). This recognition of libraries from primarily being information infrastructures to social infrastructures has been witnessed in many countries, including those in this study: Austria, the Netherlands and Sweden (Dalmer *et al.*, 2022; Lundberg and Dahlquist, 2018; Rivano Eckerdal and Carlsson, 2022; Van Melik and Merry, 2023). By making use of the concept *social infrastructure* (Klinenberg, 2018; Mattern, 2014), we focus on the role libraries can have in fostering community engagement, equality and care (Olsson Dahlquist, 2019).

As libraries increasingly turn into "spaces of care", consequently, the daily work of librarians is affected (Van Melik and Merry, 2023). Schloffel-Armstrong *et al.* (2021) claim that this additional care responsibility of libraries needs to be further explored to illustrate the restructuring of care practices across urban spaces more generally. Our research responds to this call, firstly, by investigating librarians' daily infrastructuring enactments, and secondly, by examining how infrastructuring relates to care. A social infrastructural lens allows us to analyse how librarians, as one part of the broader socio-material library infrastructure, contribute to the (re) making of the library in ways that connect it with local communities. In doing so, we underscore that libraries are ever-changing entities and conceptualise this process as a verb – *social infrastructuring* – and not just as the noun infrastructure (Rivano Eckerdal, 2018). Considering the public library as a social infrastructure, we highlight how libraries are connected to communities and then unpack how and where infrastructuring enactments takes place through human activities involving collections, places and technologies. To operationalise this research problem, we pose the following questions:

(1) How do librarians enact social infrastructuring in everyday library practice?

(2) In what ways are librarians' enactments of social infrastructuring related to care?

We investigate the forms social infrastructuring may take, how it is understood by library staff and what possible consequences arise for libraries and their community.

Below, we first provide an overview of existing research by discussing central concepts including social infrastructuring, (spaces of) care and tinkering. Then, the methodology section describes how the ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in the three local library networks. We used participant observation, involving close collaborations with librarians during their daily working routines. This is followed by a brief sketch of the three diverse national library landscapes. Our findings illustrate three modes of social infrastructuring, which often go unnoticed and/or unrecognised: maintaining, building connections and drawing boundaries. Therefore, we articulate important aspects of librarians' professional enactments that are difficult to quantify but crucial for a caring, or careful(l) library (Williams, 2017). We discuss this as careful(l) infrastructuring that is inherently multiple before concluding the article.

Infrastructuring, caring and tinkering in public libraries

The past decades' neoliberal paradigm of efficiency, outsourcing, privatisation and marketisation in the public sector has had severe consequences for funding of public goods and services, including libraries (Kann-Christensen and Andersen, 2009). Overarching global challenges, including climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and increased political polarisation, put additional pressure onto socially diverse urban contexts. In addition, empirical research shows that the number of autocracies is rising globally at the expense of representative democracies (Papada *et al.*, 2023, 6). This has contributed to bringing libraries' role in promoting democracy to the fore. The conversation around libraries' position in fostering democracy is seen in international policy documents, such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions-United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (IFLA-UNESCO) Public Library Manifesto [1], situating the public library as a crucial institution for the development of democratic values. Likewise, the influential American Library Association highlights the importance of civic participation in democratic societies in its strategic plan (ALA, 2017).

The theoretical conceptualisation of the library as social infrastructure is inspired by the work of Klinenberg (2018) and Mattern (2014). Klinenberg (2018, 32) considers public libraries to be social infrastructures "providing the setting and context for social participation". He emphasises the physical library room as constituting the social infrastructure that enables relationship-building. Similarly, Mattern (2014, np) illuminates the social role of libraries, but also highlights the "network of integrated, mutually reinforcing, evolving infrastructures" in the library. In recent years, a growing body of research on public libraries' social functions has emerged. Audunson *et al.* (2019) conclude in a comprehensive review of research that studies on public libraries as community builders have increased during the last 20 years, which is confirmed in a recent literature review by Dalmer *et al.* (2022), in which they map public libraries' capacities for social connection and inclusion. Based on their analysis, they formulate a knowledge synthesis and state that they understand public libraries as social infrastructures that *can* and *do* foster connection. As an alternative to traditional ways of measuring the use and value of libraries, they present five ways through which public libraries foster relations with their communities: (1) encouraging feelings of belonging through library services, (2) creating connections through technology, (3) reinforcing cultural identities, (4) creating safe physical spaces and (5) addressing issues of accessibility (Dalmer *et al.*, 2022, 5). They also point out that inadequate funding presents a crucial hurdle to making social connections.

The social role of libraries became increasingly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, as restrictions made it difficult to offer library activities in the usual way (Corble and Van Melik, 2021). Dalmer and Mitrovica (2022) discuss the consequences for older adults when many Canadian libraries decided to move all programming online during the pandemic. Given the diversity of patrons, including older adults, they recommend a post-pandemic approach that combines virtual and in-person services to support social connection in multiple ways. The necessity to find new ways to uphold the social role during the pandemic led to innovations, such as outdoor activities, which in some cases have become permanent (Lenstra and Campana, 2022). Crucial to the successful development of the infrastructure when implementing novel services is a synergy between library staff and local community knowledge and insights (Lenstra and Campana, 2022, 614). Consequently, a pivotal task for library staff lies in forging partnerships with other social institutions to realise the potential of libraries as social infrastructure (Lenstra *et al.*, 2022). However, Lenstra and colleagues (2022, 608) also point to the risk of libraries taking on an excessively expansive community role when developing new initiatives.

Our research starts from the premise that public libraries function as social infrastructures. We move on to explore *how* infrastructuring is enacted in librarians'

everyday work life. In line with Dalmer *et al.* (2022), we highlight that the library as social infrastructure not only consists of, or *as* a place. We expand object-centric notions of what a library *is* (i.e. buildings, books, collections, strategic plans) to include (informal) sayings and doings (Rivano Eckerdal and Carlsson, 2022; Van Melik and Hazeleger, 2023) and the relations these interactions create. Our theoretical framework thereby acknowledges infrastructuring as socio-material enactments.

We study the social infrastructuring of the library with a focus on how librarians enact it. Lankes (2012, 8) argues that the focus of librarianship should be on "our communities" rather than collections, and several researchers emphasise librarians' roles and responsibilities in relation to discrimination, racism, whiteness and inclusivity (e.g. Birdi *et al.*, 2008; Johnston and Audunson, 2019; White and Martel, 2022). Thus, librarians are not "value-neutral information providers" (Elmborg, 2006, 198), but active parts in the continuous work of (re)producing the library (Drabinski, 2019) – librarians, in short, enact the library, or *infrastructure* it.

Considering libraries as "spaces of care" affects the daily work of librarians (Van Melik and Merry, 2023). Schloffel-Armstrong *et al.* (2021) claim that this additional care responsibility of libraries needs to be problematised and interrogated to illustrate the restructuring of care practices across urban spaces more generally. Therefore, we examine how care responsibilities of libraries is understood and carried out in librarians' everyday activities. Caring includes not only giving, but also receiving care. Moreover, caring acknowledges complexities and tensions that are part of an unevenly structured world, as Mol *et al.* (2010, 14) explain:

> Care is attentive to such suffering and pain, but it does not dream up a world without lack. Not that it calls for cynicism either: care seeks to lighten what is heavy, and even if it fails it keeps on trying. Such, then, is what failure calls for in an ethics, or should we say an ethos, of care: try again, try something a bit different, be attentive.

We assume that librarians are invested in finding solutions to problems and issues that occur within infrastructuring. These problem-solving activities of fixing and managing people and technology in everyday life can be framed as *tinkering* (Mol *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, we understand care as practices that involve "a persistent tinkering in a world full of complex ambivalence and shifting tensions" (Mol *et al.*, 2010, 14). Tinkering then offers a lens to view caring not only as human-centred, often feminised practice, but recognises the socio-material and socio-technological conditions during infrastructuring.

The notion of care as tinkering resonates with Fisher and Tronto's definition of caring (1990, 40):

> . . . a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live it in as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web.

Tronto (1993, 106–108) proposes four phases of caring, which we do not necessarily view as chronological stages. (1) *Caring about* (attentiveness) delineates unmet caring needs, which are identified by an individual or a group. (2) *Caring for* (responsibility) occurs when the group or individual takes on responsibility to ensure the needs are met. (3) *Care-giving* (competence) requires actual care-giving work, that should be done with competence and skill, using the right resources and services "in a timely fashion" (Dalmer and Campbell, 2020, 905). (4) *Care receiving* (responsiveness) starts when the person who has been cared for responds to the act of care. The response should be observed and evaluated to see whether the received care was sufficient, successful, or complete (Tronto, 2013, 23). Later, Tronto added a fifth aspect, (5) *caring with*, emphasising that care is multi-dimensional and context-specific. Moreover, Tronto (2013, 148) stresses that care practices are often unequal and thus need to work in the name of justice (Williams, 2017). The reciprocal quality of care's fifth dimension

also applies to the desired effect if successfully implemented: democratic caring co-creates a caring democracy (Tronto, 2013).

Caring for a caring democracy echoes a long-standing tradition of library research that emphasises public libraries' role to promote inclusion, community and ultimately democracy. Two strands of library research can be distinguished: On the one hand, the consensus-oriented literature investigates libraries' contribution to social cohesion as accessible, low-threshold places, enabling encounters between persons with different backgrounds (see Aabø *et al.*, 2010; Audunson *et al.*, 2020; Buschman, 2005; Lankes, 2016; Stilwell, 2018). Public libraries and the librarians working there are understood as vital for offering a place for deliberative discussions aiming at consensus, often conceptualised in terms of Habermas' public sphere (Buschman, 2005; Lankes, 2016). On the other hand, in more recent years, scholars of library and information studies have begun to focus on studying *how* libraries promote democracy (see Audunson *et al.*, 2020). For example, Wiegand (2015) argues that libraries as places for information are important, but also crucial in their function as places for community and sense-making in an increasingly complex world. Notably, the library as promoter of democracy is not taken for granted but situated within the aim of advocating a public sphere (in the singular). Nevertheless, social cohesion as a value is not questioned in this line of research (see Engström, 2022).

In contrast, critical library research challenges social cohesion as a predominant value by adopting a conflict-oriented approach. Recognising that socio-spatial life, and thereby the library, is shaped by differences and inequalities, they do not regard conflicts as inherently problematic, or to be avoided *per se*, but argue that libraries are constitutively situated within conflicts. Inspired by political philosopher Mouffe (2005), this strand of library theorisation argues that violent and *antagonistic* conflicts between enemies should be transformed into *agonistic* conflicts between adversaries. Presenting an agonistic reading of libraries, Rivano Eckerdal (2017) investigates the connection between libraries, democracy, information literacy and citizenship. She explores how library and information studies may contribute to strengthen a democratic process in libraries. Similarly, Hansson (2010) argues for the relevance of agonistic pluralism in library and information studies. Previous research also analyses how libraries can be places for democratic practices by letting different opinions be recognised and adversaries respected (Carlsson *et al.*, 2023; Engström, 2022; Rivano Eckerdal, 2018; Rivano Eckerdal and Carlsson, 2022; Seale, 2016). We follow this strand of research and acknowledge conflict as a prerequisite of democracy.

In the analysis, we utilise the theoretical frameworks outlined above, including the concepts of social infrastructure, care and tinkering to analyse librarians' social infrastructuring enactments against the background of a conflict-oriented notion of democracy. Before proceeding, we introduce the methodology and the respective local library landscapes where the study is conducted.

Methodology

Our research is empirically situated in three cities: Vienna (Austria), Rotterdam (the Netherlands) and Malmö (Sweden). There are important differences in how the libraries operate and are financed in these countries (see next section). We wanted to conduct the study in urban contexts and the cities were selected in consideration of the relevance of the local library network, the comparative potential within the project and in dialogue with the non-academic partners in our project consortium. In each city, we investigated the local library network, consisting of multiple branches located in different neighbourhoods. In each network, we conducted fieldwork at the central library and a branch in a neighbourhood with pressing systemic challenges, such as high levels of unemployment and social inequality (see Table 1). The branch library was chosen in collaboration with the management of each local library network.

	Austria	The Netherlands	Sweden	Total
Investigated library network	*Büchereien Wien* (Vienna Libraries)	*Bibliotheek Rotterdam* (Rotterdam Public Library)	*Biblioteken i Malmö* (Libraries of Malmö)	
Selected library branch 1 (central library)	*Hauptbücherei Wien* (Vienna Main Library)	*Centrale Bibliotheek* (Central Library)	*Malmö Stadsbibliotek* (Malmö City Library)	
Selected library branch 2 (neighbourhood branch)	*Bücherei am Schöpfwerk* (Library at Schöpfwerk)	*Bibliotheek Delfshaven* (Delfshaven Library)	*Rosengårdsbiblioteket* (Rosengård Library)	
Number of followed librarians	6	6	4	16
Number of days of participant observations	9	11	40	60

Source(s): Authors' own

Table 1. Overview of selected case studies and research methods

By including these different national and urban contexts we enable a more fine-grained understanding of the local processes of "infrastructuring". This required a qualitative research approach in order to produce empirical material that is rich in depth and detail to grasp the nuances of infrastructuring in everyday library practice. We conducted participant observations of 16 professional librarians during their day-to-day work routines. Following librarians during their daily activities includes moving around with them, observing what they are doing and talking to them about what they do. It includes paying attention to what is said (or not) and done in different spaces of the library. Thus, the fieldwork consists of a mix of participating, observing and helping librarians and patrons (if applicable and/or requested). Our chosen method suggests a symmetrical form of ethnography, in which the observing researcher and the actor engage in a dialogical relationship (Czarniawska, 2007, 21). In contrast to formal interviews, this method allows for observing and explaining practices directly in real-life situations well known to the librarian and unfamiliar to the researcher. This enables research of complex professional activities that the researcher is perhaps not qualified to perform (Czarniawska, 2007, 55–6). Whilst following and asking questions about what is going on (or not), the researcher and librarian are mutually observing each other (Czarniawska, 2007, 56). This double observation opens opportunities for conversations on the situation at hand; the librarian is invited to reflect upon and thus contribute to the research in an inclusive way. Through this method, we have gained insights into how librarians enact libraries as social infrastructures. The fieldwork was conducted over a period from December 2022 through October 2023. The number of librarians observed differed between the cities, depending on variations in the possibilities available for the participating organisations and for the researchers in each country. We ensured theoretical saturation regarding the practices in each library network.

Ethnographic fieldwork requires ethical considerations of possibly unintended or unexpected consequences. During the period of observations, access must be negotiated beforehand, but also be re-negotiated during the period of data collection, albeit sometimes tiresome (Czarniawska, 2007). Before and during the fieldwork, the different researchers continuously discussed ethical considerations and relevant procedures were undertaken in

each country depending on national regulations. To respect the anonymity of respondents as much as possible, all librarians' names in this article are pseudonyms.

Fieldnotes were written in German, Dutch and Swedish respectively. In each country, the researchers conducted a preliminary analysis of these notes by selecting insightful situations from the field. Based on these preliminary findings, the researchers wrote ethnographic vignettes that were discussed within the group of researchers. By translating field notes and recontextualising the on-site situations, analytical distance was created. This is intended to increase a nuanced ethical procedure and the degree of conceptual abstraction in this paper. Ethnographic vignettes are a form of theoretical storytelling (McGranahan, 2020) based on scenes documented in ethnographic fieldnotes (Bonz and Eisch-Angus, 2017). During analysis, particularly expressive scenes are treated as "paradigmatic experiences" (Bloom-Christen and Grunow, 2022, 12). They are rewritten to capture meanings which may not have been made explicit in the raw fieldnotes. Thus, ethnographic vignettes are both part and result of a complex process of participating in the field, documenting, analysing and writing (Demetriou, 2023). In our research we wrote, discussed and collectively edited vignettes not as "simply an illustration" (Kesselring in Bloom-Christen and Grunow, 2022, 13) of our results, but as a methodological device that allowed us to reflect within an international team with separate research sites in three countries and produce a shared analysis.

In the analysis below, excerpts from these ethnographic vignettes are presented. Themes emerging from the vignettes were inductively developed by the researchers. These were subsequently discussed with the non-academic research partners on several occasions, including the studied library networks and the research project's international advisory board. These discussions helped us to focus on perspectives in our results that are relevant for understanding libraries as social infrastructures also outside the three library networks included in our study.

In the subsequent analysis, further analytical themes were conceptualised, culminating in three modes of social infrastructuring which structure the analysis section of this paper. The phases of caring about, caring for, care-giving, care receiving and caring with (Tronto, 1993, 2013), and the concept tinkering (Mol *et al.*, 2010) provided a specified analytical lens for us to tease out the different modes of care that we found in our material.

Library landscapes in Austria, the Netherlands and Sweden

Public libraries in Europe share certain organisational features, such as being open to the public despite varying subscription-based and paid membership models and being funded primarily by subsidies. However, they also notably differ in the programming they offer, as well as their historical and funding-related specificities. In some countries, there is a cost related to getting a library membership (e.g. in the Netherlands and Austria), in other countries it is free of charge (e.g. in Sweden). In some countries, public libraries are mainly staffed with professional librarians (e.g. in Sweden), in others, parts of the library landscape rely on voluntary work (e.g. in the Netherlands). This study is situated in three countries, Austria, the Netherlands and Sweden and three library networks consisting of all library branches within a city. In this section, we introduce the respective public library systems with regards to what is shared between the three countries and what is different. This overview of the different national library landscapes is relevant for contextualising our local studies in these three countries.

The library landscape in Austria goes back to the 19th century, when the church, the liberal enlightened bourgeoisie, and the labour movement competed in educating the public, each with their own public libraries and ideological outlooks. Municipal public library networks were established in the 1930s in some cities including Vienna, enforced by

the Austro-Fascist government and Nazi occupation (Kolar, 2008). Due to these historical complexities, the Austrian library system differs from the Scandinavian, Dutch, Slavic and Anglo-Saxon settings in three ways. First, no single public body represents all public lending libraries in Austria and no overarching library act regulates state support and quality control. Public libraries are separated from academic and administrative libraries. Whilst the latter receive basic state funding, the former operate without a statutory legal basis. No state institution on the national, regional, or local level is legally obliged to set up, run and maintain them. As a result, library provision is left to a range of voluntary funding bodies including magistrates, the church, trade-unions and institutions such as hospitals, prisons, or schools. Second, consequently, communalisation of public libraries remains inconsistent due to the historical patchwork of various funding bodies. The *Arbeitskreis Kritischer Bibliothekarinnen und Bibliothekare* (Working Group of Critical Librarians) states a lack of sufficient provision of information and literature across the country and less than half of Austrian municipalities have a public library (Kribibi, 2012). Third, the federal setup of the Austrian state makes it difficult for provinces and municipalities to reach agreement on library provision, standards and financing. Negotiations on a library development plan are ongoing.

The municipal library network in Vienna, *Büchereien Wien,* holds 38 branch libraries and caters for over two million inhabitants of Austria's growing capital city. Two branch libraries are equipped to function as "open libraries", which means that patrons can use them also outside opening times. Occasionally, the magistrate uses libraries as an easy-to-access institution to provide municipal services to the population.

In the Netherlands, the first public libraries arose around 1900 and functioned as reading rooms where people could read and study undisturbedly. Before, in the 19th century, most reading rooms were organised around religious and social philosophies. The Dutch government started to provide funds for public libraries between 1907 and 1910, which were then mostly run by volunteers. In the second half of the 20th century the main function of public libraries shifted to primarily lending books and magazines (VOB, 2023). Since the beginning of the 21st century, the main function has changed again, towards the social-cultural public library as stipulated in the *Library Act* (Wsob, 2015), which has been evaluated and updated over the years (Van Mil *et al.*, 2019). In this Act, five societal functions are seen as essential for "full-fledged libraries", these include (1) providing knowledge and information, (2) offering opportunities for education and development, (3) stimulating reading, (4) organising debates and meetings and (5) making people acquainted with art and culture. Due to the neoliberal political situation and the COVID-19 pandemic, cultural organisations, including public libraries, have faced financial cuts in the Netherlands in recent years and many library branches have closed (Van Mil *et al.*, 2019). However, the pandemic also made the societal importance of public libraries as physical places visible. This importance is now recognised by many political parties, resulting in nation-wide changes for public libraries, including more financial support. As of 2025, the government will be making larger financial contributions to the public libraries, and municipalities will be responsible for providing enough libraries in each municipality through a "duty of care".

In Rotterdam, there are 22 branches of the Public Library Rotterdam, including the central branch and a self-service branch. Rotterdam has over 660.000 residents as of 2023, making it the second largest city in the Netherlands. The city of Rotterdam has relatively diverse population in terms of ethnicity, in which 54% of the residents have a migration background. Moreover, it is regarded as a city that faces many problems such as marginalisation and relatively high (drug-related) crime rates, but Rotterdam is also seen as one of the cultural centres in the country.

During the 20th century, Sweden was transformed into what is referred to as a "welfare state". The state had a strong position and collective and collaborative solutions was often

advocated. The public library movement in Sweden is rooted in civil society, but during the 20th century, public subsidies expanded and public libraries were established throughout the country. Today, all municipalities in Sweden have public libraries. Since 1 January 1996, there is a *Library Act* (SFS 1996:1596) in force in Sweden and a new *Library Act* (SFS 2013:801) came into effect on 1 January 2014. The preamble of the *Library Act* states that: "The libraries in the public library system shall promote the development of a democratic society by contributing to the transfer of knowledge and the free formation of opinions" (SFS 2013:801 §2 translated in Swedish Library Association, 2015, 7). The preamble also states that library activities shall be available to everyone. Furthermore, the *Library Act* identifies prioritised groups including persons with disabilities, persons speaking one of five national minority languages, or other languages than Swedish or the national minority languages and easy-to read Swedish. Public libraries shall devote particular attention to children and young adults (Swedish Library Association, 2015).

In Malmö, there are 13 public libraries, including the Malmö City Library and 12 neighbourhood branches. The number of area libraries are increasing, and new libraries will open up in the coming years to better serve the population of 327.000 inhabitants. Malmö is the third biggest city in Sweden and nearly half of the population is younger than 35 years old. The population is also diverse in terms of ethnicity and approximately one-third of the population is born abroad.

As shown above, the library landscapes surrounding the library networks where the fieldwork is conducted are diverse, even if they share similarities. These differences as well as similarities enrich the following analysis.

Three modes of social infrastructuring

In the analysis of our empirical material, three modes of social infrastructuring emerged as well as important characteristics that they share that have significant consequences for librarianship and libraries. We situate these empirical findings in a conflict-oriented notion of libraries. The infrastructuring modes are: *Social infrastructuring as maintenance work*, *social infrastructuring as building connections* and s*ocial infrastructuring as drawing boundaries to ensure sustainable librarianship*. Overarching these modes are the extent to which care is part of infrastructuring enactments and that the careful(l) infrastructuring is multiple and difficult to quantify.

Social infrastructuring as maintenance work

People come to the public library to take part in the resources that they find there, but they also come to the library to be part of a community, during activities such as book talks and language cafés. In addition, people visit the library to meet the staff and ask them for help with making photocopies, lending books, or just to chat. Those activities – involving librarians, patrons, library resources and the places, in which they are situated – are part of and contribute to, the *infrastructuring* of the library. But a social infrastructure should not be taken for granted; it requires the librarians' continuous maintenance work to engage with challenges and problems. The heterogeneous working tasks of librarians and the *tinkering* needed to engage with occurring situations are illuminated in the following excerpt from a vignette:

> / . . . / There is a woman at the 'Bieb to go' [a certain section of the central library] downstairs who wants to borrow a DVD. Officially, the 'Bieb to go' is only open from 2 p.m. onwards, but that is not clearly indicated on the website, Marga [the librarian] tells me. We get going right away.
>
> At the counter, an older woman is waiting. She has reserved a DVD for her husband and would like to pay to borrow it. It turns out that the equipment of the 'Bieb to go' is not working. Because the library

> server was hacked a while back, a lot of equipment has been replaced. Marga laughs and says a lot of other things need to be replaced as well. Much of the equipment was outdated and made the library an easy target. Now, the lady cannot get an official receipt. Marga explains that she can just pay. The alarm might go off but then she can show the payment receipt, Marga reassures her. The woman thanks us warmly and walks away. / . . . /
>
> When we walk back upstairs, we see that the woman is still at the payment machine. We walk over to her, a bit confused since it has been a couple of minutes since she left us at the counter. When we get there, we find out that she forgot to press "yes" when asked if she wants to pay by card. She is glad that we took a moment to come back to her. For the second time, looking at me, she says that the staff is so friendly and helpful. We smile at her, and Marga says that it is no problem at all. (Excerpts from vignette, Rotterdam)

In the vignette, the librarian, Marga, is continuously tinkering with arrangements of people and technological aids. It starts when she decides to help the patron, even though the extended section of the library called "Bieb to go" formally is not open yet. Thereafter, Marga and the patron are confronted with malfunctioning technology, but Marga finds a solution that enables the patron to borrow the DVD anyways. This situation exemplifies how ordinary library tasks such as disseminating culture and information by making it accessible to patrons also are practices of care; Marga clearly *cares for* the patron by making sure she gets what she needs, and Marga practices *care-giving* by helping the patron to access the material (Tronto, 2010). These mundane tasks manifest how practices of care are tinkered with to adapt to patrons' needs via technology and unanticipated situations (Mol *et al.*, 2010). Since the equipment is malfunctioning, the librarian must find another solution making use of other technologies (e.g. via hand-writing a receipt).

In addition, Marga later recognises that the patron has problems with the payment machine and heads back to help her. In this case, it is not technology itself that is malfunctioning; it is the relation between patron and technology that breaks down. The tinkering then consists of explaining to the patron what she needs to do to resolve the situation. When Marga returns to the patron, it shows Marga's caring *responsiveness* since she actively reaches out to make sure that the patron gets what she needs (Tronto, 2010). In some cases, this responsiveness results in librarians' bending rules and protocols. Marga helps the old lady even though the "Bieb to go" section is formally not open yet. In Malmö, we noted similar situations, in which librarians are bending the rules to maintain infrastructuring and practice care. For example, librarians change the list of reservations to enable a loan of a certain book to a patron, and they enable a patron to renew the loan for a fourth time, even if the maximum number of renewals is actually three. Moreover, they let patrons take printed copies, even if the person cannot pay. And so, they allow humanity and not bureaucracy to infuse the organisation.

In these instances, tinkering involves technologies and people, but it is the rules or formal structures that are tinkered with. By adapting to the situation and putting the patron's needs and wishes in the centre instead of allowing formalities to decide the outcome, librarians practice care. Thus, instead of "impartial judgements and firm decisions" these situations require "attuned attentiveness and adaptive tinkering" (Mol *et al.*, 2010, 15). Whilst Mattern (2018, n.p.) asks "Who gets to organise the maintenance of infrastructure and who then executes the work?", the notion of tinkering allows to see that, oftentimes, maintaining is *not* systematically organised but spontaneously executed with creativity and care. In the next section, we discuss how these infrastructuring enactments contribute to connection-building.

Social infrastructuring as building connections

Care practices maintain the library as social infrastructure by building connections between patrons and librarians. During fieldwork, one significant part of librarians' everyday doings

appeared as building connections. This ranges from librarians greeting patrons when they arrive at the library to finding solutions to patrons' problems and managing language barriers and treating patrons with empathy and respect. The result is often gratitude and appreciation from the patrons for the treatment, help and resources available as we have seen in the case of the old lady explicitly recognising the caring effort of the librarian above. Another example is a class of newly arrived teenagers who came to *Rosengårdsbiblioteket* with their teachers and handed over letters they had written in Swedish, in which they express their gratitude to the library and send greetings to the newly relocated Rosengårdsbiblioteket:

> / . . . / a group of teenagers arrive together with two adults. They come up to the counter and one of the adults leans in over the counter and says that they have been in contact previously with a colleague and got information that they are welcome without booking an appointment. This is confirmed by Kim [the librarian] who welcomes them. They are a school class in another part of Malmö. It is a preparatory class for pupils aged 13–16 who newly arrived in Sweden. The teacher turns to one of the pupils in the group, a boy, and shows with his hand that he can come forward. The boy has a bunch of papers in his hand that he gives to Kim and says that it is letters with greetings not only from him but from the whole class. It says congratulations to the new library and the work they do. Kim thanks the whole group for the letters and says that they will put them up in the library. In the afternoon, Kim's colleague puts up the letters at the teenage section on the second floor, that is dedicated to children and young people. (Excerpt from vignette, Malmö)

The letters with greetings and congratulations, decorated with drawings, can be seen as manifestations of an already-established relation between the teenagers and the library. At the same time, the situation in which the teenagers hand over the letters to the librarian, could strengthen both the relation between them and the librarian and the relation between the teenagers and the library as an institution or infrastructure. The practice of gift-giving creates relations in a powerful manner. According to Mauss' (2015) classic theory on gifts, the act to give ensures that the recipient enters a relationship with the giver. The act of giving is reciprocated by Kim and colleagues through displaying the letters publicly in the library. The displaying of the greetings in a public institution could be seen as an enactment of emphasising the teenagers as important and appreciated members of society. The infrastructuring thereby goes beyond the walls of the single institution of the public library into other societal structures.

In addition, the situation described in the vignette highlights that practices of care are not necessarily unilateral (Mol *et al.*, 2010; Tronto, 2013, 148). The writing and drawing of letters to congratulate the library are practices of care and manifestations of the teenagers' care for the library. When Kim receives the greetings, the focus lies on connecting with the teenagers, she *cares for* them (Tronto, 2010). In this act of *caring with,* a mutual, reciprocal relationship is built. This also becomes evident in a reading group we observed:

> / . . . /conversations during the reading group are not only about the text or small talk, but often include personal stories about life and death, next to the mundane and in-between. Bas, the librarian organising the meeting each month, actively listens, asks questions, and sometimes writes down things he did not know about the participants. Through the shared listening and asking questions, participants feel comfortable to share. They feel seen by the librarian. Furthermore, some of them have even formed friendships and come together outside of the group as well. The relationships formed here are reciprocal, as the librarian shares stories, and is asked questions, too. (Excerpt from vignette, Rotterdam)

By organising activities such as reading groups, language cafés and IT groups, librarians actively contribute to relationships that reach beyond library activities. In the vignette, relationships are built during the conversations in the group that meets regularly. The reading group is an initiative of the librarian that practice *caring about* patrons who are interested in discussing what they read. The librarian's competence is the base for including

the group in a conversation that is meaningful for all of them. Starting as *care-giving*, the participants engage in co-making it a meaningful event by taking responsibility and *caring for* listening to each other in responsive ways. Hence, reciprocal caring unfolds. This relates to Klinenberg's (2018) research on why death rates were much lower in certain areas of the city after a disastrous heat wave. These areas had well-functioning social infrastructures, such as public libraries, where people engaged in exchange and cultivated meaningful relationships. In times of crises, people therefore knew others living in the neighbourhood and were aware of who might need help and support.

The connection-building in public libraries also involves external partnerships in the sense of librarians building relations with organisations. These initiatives might come from libraries themselves or from organisations interested to connect with the library, resulting in collaborations such as public talks, exhibitions in the library, or putting up posters on the library bulletin board.

Potential contacts can also result in requests, either from an individual or an organisation, that are turned down. What librarians do is to select, balance and evaluate the connections and initiatives that they realise whilst infrastructuring the library. In doing so, a variety of connections is sought to provide a wide range of activities, resources and possibilities to be part of infrastructuring whilst others are not considered conducive to, or part of, infrastructuring. In this manner, librarians support and welcome certain encounters, whilst others are deprioritised, inhibited, or excluded. Here, the potentially conflict-ridden negotiations about values, ideas and priorities can come to the fore. There is no roadmap or guideline to follow; instead; librarians try and tinker different ways forward, and sometimes, they will fail or not make everybody happy. To continue trying is then what the ethics of care suggests, to continue by carefully tinkering (Mol *et al.*, 2010, 14).

Social infrastructuring as drawing boundaries to ensure sustainable librarianship

Library patrons' use of the library also involves difficulties because people turn to the library with problems that the library cannot, or should not, solve. Therefore, librarianship also includes drawing boundaries by communicating what the library cannot help with or support. Sometimes, the library staff cannot help due to ethical reasons of protecting patrons' privacy; sometimes, other institutions should be supporting the person in need of help (see Michnik, 2018). However, various parts of society, such as employment agencies, migration agencies, social insurance agencies or banks, no longer offer sufficient physical meeting places for help and support.

Different life situations, often related to the institutions mentioned above, require providing information via bureaucratic documents and forms. This is often urgent and can have major consequences for the people concerned. When the forms are available online, difficulty to complete them can be framed as a lack of digital knowledge. Then, help to fill them in is part of what libraries should provide. But it is difficult to decide when the task of providing knowledge about digital infrastructures and services clashes with situations that involve access to sensitive personal information. Where and how to draw the line in such tricky situations is a recurring topic of discussion amongst colleagues in all of the libraries we studied. Below is an example of such a conversation in Vienna.

> At a team meeting of the three librarians at a small branch library, the topic of "helping patrons" comes up. Vienna residents can apply online for a subsidy for energy and housing costs. The magistrates have asked libraries to be one of the places to facilitate this. The team acknowledges that filling in the applications can take quite a while. But they say, it makes sense to place this service in the library, and they are "happy to help". The conversation moves on to one patron who frequently asks for help with filling in various forms. One colleague had agreed to help her as a one-off, but the patron has many forms to fill. He is willing to help her, he does not want to let her down. The team

> considers – how to balance the willingness to help as a caring librarian with the regular library tasks? Can a relative take over? This does not seem to be a solution. The team agrees that the colleague will help her only when the library is quiet. Otherwise, she will have to wait. I am listening, impressed by how the different positions are being taken seriously – the commitment of the helping colleague, the care for the patron, the needs of the library for a librarian to see to all the standard tasks while also helping patrons out on other things. (Excerpt from vignette, Vienna)

The struggle to find time for helping people is shared between the librarians. It is difficult to find a balance between providing help that people need and the time available to provide other services. In the vignette, the librarians recognise the patron's need, they *care about* the patron, they can serve as capable *care-givers* as they have the required competences. As the patron regularly comes back, she is an accustomed *care-receiver* and expects to get help from the librarians. They discuss if this task is the responsibility of the library, should they *care for* her? The solution they arrive at is to help her when there is no one else asking for help.

The negotiation between colleagues in the vignette is a way of tinkering through talking and balancing different assignments that shows the dual nature of care. Dalmer and Campbell (2020, 904) highlight this as "comprising both affect or concern and labour or tasks". In another conversation in Vienna, a librarian talked about these demanding decisions. She described the tension between wanting to help the patron and knowing that other tasks are waiting as a bridging position in which she asked herself if the problem at hand is her job as a librarian. The librarian's bemusement emphasises the almost impossible task they face and the competence required to solve it. A reason for this kind of conflict is lack of resources to meet the patron's needs. It is a "deterrent to social connections" (Dalmer *et al.*, 2022, 35), and so, we regard it as a hurdle for the infrastructuring to happen at all.

In Rotterdam, similar conflicts regarding librarians' working tasks are prevalent. According to the *Library Act,* librarians shall provide public service relating to five societal functions (see above). The library should also be a place where citizens can ask questions relating to the digital government and get assistance with related procedures. Many patrons, however, come to the library with questions about other institutions (e.g. banks) or personal requests, and they often share personal information. This relates to the critical question raised by Tronto (2010, 163): "Who should determine the needs of those who 'need' care?" Tronto argues that any institution that presumes that needs are fixed is likely to be mistaken and might inflict harm in trying to meet such needs. With this, Tronto (2010) seeks a more flexible and expansive approach to a caring process, where recognising complexity is crucial. In such caring practices, librarians need resources, time and competencies to tinker and create multiple solutions, as well as possibilities of drawing boundaries when necessary.

As shown, care shapes the drawing of boundaries, as it is done via conviviality, which implies "an ability to be at ease in contexts of diversity" (Hemer *et al.*, 2020, 3). Attention is paid by librarians to carefully facilitate that people share space, time and resources. To create and maintain such a space, some requests must be declined, or deferred. For example, a librarian in Malmö explains that they cannot fill in forms for the patrons, since that will create an impossible working situation. In this case, it was an urgent matter of a woman needing to fill in a form for unemployment benefits. Instead of filling in the form completely, the librarian made a great effort to find the address of the trade union that could help the woman to complete it and made sure that she would go there. This is another example of how librarians recognise a patron's need and provide help whilst stating that the matter in question is not a library responsibility (Tronto, 1993).

Boundary work is a significant feature of librarians' work as previously shown by Williams (2018, 704) in her study of librarians' work in relation to people experiencing

homelessness: "Boundary work is a social construct that has to do with constituting, negotiating, and breaking boundaries between abstract fields of knowledge". When drawing boundaries, it is crucial to frame the latter as based on a professional judgement as librarianship is always at risk of being perceived as a calling and, as Ettarh (2018) points out, this "vocational awe" correlates to problems like burnout. Hence, it is critical for librarians to draw boundaries and delimit their work tasks in order to promote a sustainable work environment (Klostermann, 2021). The understanding of making such decisions vary. Drawing a boundary because a work task is not part of the job is not so demanding, whereas a need to turn down a wish or a need due to lack of resources is challenging. One complicating circumstance is the need to report work to funders in systems that require a set of indicators that perhaps do not match what is required for enacting the infrastructure in a careful way. For example, in a system used in Malmö it is not possible to include things that are part of the regular activities at the library. Instead, activities must be development-oriented, meet the objectives of the library, be possible to evaluate and have a clear effect on the people of Malmö. The required set of performance indicators then obfuscates important parts of the professional enactment.

Care-ful(l) infrastructuring is inherently multiple

As shown above, to enact the library as a caring, or careful(l), social infrastructure involves continuous, often small-scale acts of tinkering. Saying hello to patrons when they enter the library, adjusting technological equipment that does not work as supposed, digital forms to be filled in, conversations with patrons about reading and life, conversations with colleagues about work, letters to be received and exhibited in the library, addresses to union offices to be found and shared. Librarians' efforts to meet patrons and take various initiatives to broaden the library's activities to reach more people, are ongoing and never finished. These endeavours to extend the existing network of relations are an important way to set the infrastructure in motion and to keep maintaining it (Lenstra and Campana, 2022, 614). This is how infrastructuring involves not only staff and resources within the library, but also connects with the communities that it is a part of. However, when librarians engage in infrastructuring they also draw boundaries for what they can and should do (or not). Based on decisions made together with colleagues, the pace and direction of the infrastructuring is set and adjusted.

We refer to these enactments of maintaining, building connections and drawing boundaries as three modes of social infrastructuring. They are connected; the division between them is analytical rather than empirically tangible. The three modes of infrastructuring therefore intersect and overlap. At the same time, there are overarching similarities in the infrastructuring of and in libraries; care appears in *all* infrastructuring modes and care is both hard to see or talk about and difficult to count. Furthermore, the role that care practices have in enacting the library often do not fit in internal systems used for reporting and evaluating library work. Thereby, practices of care risks being invisible in systems that prioritise measurable and easily evaluable efforts (Mol, 2010, 224). This lack of visibility can have significant consequences for libraries as Dalmer *et al.* (2022) pointed out. When libraries' contributions are difficult to express in the manners required by the funders, public libraries can become an easy target for budget cuts.

Adding to the difficulty of quantifying or measuring care practices is that they are often non-verbal. However, this does not make them insignificant. On the contrary,

> Perhaps, when articulated, when put in so many words, care will be easier to defend in the public spaces which is currently at risk of being squeezed. Perhaps care practices can be strengthened if we find the right terms for talking about them. A language suitable for (self) reflection may also help those involved in care to improve their practices. (Mol *et al.*, 2010, 10–11).

Thus, by verbalising practices of care, the advocacy for public libraries could be strengthened.

By analysing caring as a process with aspects of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness and reciprocity care is not narrowed to care-giving (Tronto, 2010). The interaction between care providers and people needing care can be both complex and complicated (Dalmer and Campbell, 2020, 899). Dalmer and Campbell (2020) emphasise "the importance of interpersonal relationships, reciprocity, and empathetic benevolence", whilst using the ethics of care lens. The complexity of practicing care is central to our analysis of librarians' daily enactment of the library.

With our conflict-oriented understanding of libraries, we want to underscore that the complexity of care is not a problem to be avoided or ever fully be overcome. Conflicts are unavoidable also whilst caring. What we want to advocate is a role for libraries that can accommodate such conflicts in a way that supports democracy. If libraries could be spaces for recognising inequality and allowing room for the reciprocal quality of care their social role could be part of a caring democracy (Tronto, 2013).

Our findings can be viewed as a litmus test showcasing the condition of the welfare state. The research is conducted in three affluent countries that belong to Western Europe with traditions of welfare states. However, over the last decades, all three countries have undergone changes that include privatisation of services that previously formed part of the public offerings as well as budget cuts that affect the services that remain publicly funded. This confirms Dalmer *et al.* (2022) analysis of research from Canada, Europe and Australasia. Criticism of recent decades' goal-oriented management with measurable effects has grown strong. We share their urge to understand and describe the use and value of public libraries differently. We hope to inspire to a new way of evaluating the contribution of libraries to communities, namely by opposing the narrow yardstick given by quantifiable goals and instead putting forward alternatives that highlight the various ways in which libraries and librarians contribute to society. In other words, the vocabulary of modes of infrastructuring suggested here should be included in describing the daily library work that is done.

Conclusion

From the analysis of our fieldwork in Malmö, Rotterdam and Vienna, three modes of librarians' social infrastructuring have emerged. In all three cities, we have found that social infrastructuring comprises of librarians' maintaining, connection-building and drawing boundaries to ensure sustainable librarianship. By following librarians closely during their work and talking with them about what is going on (or not) we have explored their daily infrastructuring enactments. Furthermore, when asking in what ways librarians' social infrastructuring is related to care, we have found that care practices feature prominent as shared characteristic across all the modes. In short, care practices infuse any type of infrastructuring.

Our analysis also shows that care practices are very present in librarians' social infrastructuring practices meaning that we can talk about care as an important part of today's library ethos. However, care is often difficult to quantify and hard to describe as it is not only verbally practiced. Therefore, an awareness of social infrastructuring demands a (re)view of value that is not solely quantitative. With the three interrelated modes of social infrastructuring described above, we have offered articulations of significant parts of librarians' professional infrastructuring. These articulations can further be used to demonstrate the caring aspect of librarianship to funders; they can also be used in conversations between colleagues and for students interested in developing librarianship further. As part of our ongoing project, we develop policy briefs with recommendations including such articulations based on our findings to address the

different stakeholders with influence over libraries. In the next part of our project, we will examine library stakeholders that design and influence policy making processes of public libraries and invite them to explore the potential of public libraries as social infrastructures.

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Note

1. The most recent IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto was published in 2022. UNESCO published the first Public Library Manifesto in 1949 (https://www.ifla.org/public-library-manifesto/).

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