

## Rules of (Mis)Conduct: User Behaviour in Public Libraries

**Abstract:** Unobtrusive observation in nine sites in two public libraries in Southern Ontario explored user compliance with posted rules of conduct. With the exception of children who were frequently loud and rambunctious, most users followed the rules. This finding is consistent with Goffman's idea that behaviour in public places is governed by normative assumptions of public order.

**Résumé :** L'observation non obstructive effectuée dans neuf sites de deux bibliothèques publiques du sud de l'Ontario a examiné la conformité de l'utilisateur avec les règles de conduite affichées. À l'exception des enfants qui étaient fréquemment bruyants et querelleurs, la plupart des utilisateurs ont suivi le règlement. Ces résultats sont conformes avec l'idée de Goffman affirmant que le comportement dans les endroits publics est régi par des conventions normatives au sujet de l'ordre public.

### 1. Introduction

In an earlier study of user behaviour in public libraries (McKechnie et al, 2004), a surprise finding was that library patrons frequently violated library rules by engaging in behaviours which disrupted the use of the library by others. Additionally, staff were often seen to ignore or even encourage this behaviour. The present study seeks to explore this phenomenon further.

As with many spaces in the public sphere, public libraries are regulated by rules and policies that are established to protect the rights, interests and safety of library users and staff. Rules of conduct are normally posted in libraries, often near the circulation desk or on library s where they can be easily accessed and viewed by users. These documents typically contain policies that address issues such as: the use of disruptive, intrusive, threatening, abusive or harassing language or behaviour; respect and care for library property and materials; consumption of food and beverages; safety and supervision of children; use of cell phones; and, the use of library computers.

#### *Literature review*

A substantial amount of professional library and information science (LIS) literature has addressed user codes of conduct. The development and enforcement of rules of conduct have been discussed (see, for example, Cranford, 2001). Other authors have examined what happens when rules are not enforced and disruptive behaviour ensues (Stein, 2003). Violent behaviour in the library has been addressed by Smith (1994) and Farrugia (2002) among others. The debate regarding the necessity or not of maintaining quiet in the library has been written about not only by LIS practitioners (e.g., DiMattia, 2005) but also by those working in the field of American Studies (Kelman, 2001).

The behaviour, safety and supervision of children in libraries have been discussed in depth, with some arguing that strict codes of conduct be enforced to ensure that children are not put at risk and that parents should refrain from leaving their children unsupervised and treating the library as a “child-storage depot” (Robertson, 2004, 111). The behaviour of adolescents in public libraries has also warranted much attention. Various initiatives to curb disruptive and “rowdy” behaviour have been presented (Ishizuka 2004).

Recently rules and policies concerning the consumption of food and drink in the library (such as the “No Food, No Drink” campaign; see Bancroft, 1998) have been relaxed. One study identified the reasons for permitting food and/or drink as related to “improving the library’s image and making patrons more comfortable” (Lyons, 2000, 342). Conversely, with the proliferation of computer and Internet use in the library, strict acceptable use policies have been implemented (Bradburn, 1995). Some, however, caution public library directors to find “the appropriate balance between the profession’s norms and values and the local community’s norms and values” in order to avoid the alienation of users (Ward, 2003, 17). More recently, public library staff members have been faced with the problem of cell phone use in libraries and the issue of whether or not to enforce an out-right ban (Hall, 2002; Knecht, 2003; Robertson, 2003), an issue that has also been of interest to sociologists (Perrson, 2001).

Although grounded in places other than public libraries, there is a substantial body of literature in Sociology that is relevant to this study. For example, Cahill (1990) has examined conceptions of children’s behaviour in public and proposes that children’s access to and movement within public places is quite limited, due to parental concerns for children’s safety and children’s potentially disruptive behaviour. The behaviour of adolescents in public places has also been of interest since much of adolescent social life revolves around access to and activity within public spaces. Many of these spaces, such as shopping malls, have adopted lenient rules and policies that allow adolescents to meet in a “safe and socially neutral territory” (Lewis, 1989, 888). Williamson (2002) discussed the use of “civility proxies” (such as signs to communicate rules in public spaces) and how the use of these proxies by private interests can undermine the informal negotiation of social tolerance by its users. This piece provides further support for some of the LIS literature that advocates for stronger enforcement of library rules and policies (Cranford, 2001; Stein, 2003; Ishizuka, 2004; Robertson, 2004).

Finally, Anthropologists have also been interested in behaviour in public places. Greenhouse (1982) differentiates between rules, or prescriptive and authoritative statements designed to regulate behaviour, and norms, commonly (though not unanimously) held, unwritten guidelines.

While we found evidence in the literature of an interest in behaviour in a variety of public places in light of the rules (written or unwritten) which govern that behaviour, we were unable to locate any empirical research that specifically addressed this phenomenon in public libraries. This exploratory study addresses this gap.

### *Theoretical framework*

Two theoretical frames inform this study. In his *Behavior in Public Places*, Goffman (1963) suggests that a person’s conduct in public places is governed by the normative assumptions of public order and that codes of conduct are developed through and enforced by “situational rulings” (216). Certeau’s (1984) idea of the “practice of

everyday life” postulates that dominant social institutions develop strategies which define legitimate ways for users to interact with institutions. In response people employ tactics to circumvent the intended uses of an institution in order to meet their own personal goals. These theoretical frameworks guided our data collection and analysis as we observed users in their interactions with public libraries (an example of Goffman’s public places) in the context of library rules of conduct (an example of Certeau’s institutional strategies) and the tactics used by library patrons in response to posted rules.

### *Research questions*

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Do library users comply with posted rules of conduct? If not, what tactics do they use to circumvent the rules?
2. What strategies, if any, do library staff use to enforce the rules?

## **2. Method**

To answer these research questions we conducted an exploratory observation study in two large library systems in Southern Ontario, the central library and five branches in a community of 330,000 (Library A) and the central library and two branches in a city of 210,000 (Library B). Unobtrusive observation (Spradley, 1980) was chosen as the method for the study as it is effective in capturing the naturally occurring behaviour of library users. Locations were purposefully selected to capture diversity within the communities and included locations that served populations with varied education, income, ethnicity and age. Observations took place both weekdays and weekends as well as mornings, afternoons and evenings. Data were recorded as field notes. Data were collected in March and April, 2006 and data collection continued until saturation which was reached at just under 60 hours of observation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to analyze the data for emergent themes. As per the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness was assured through the use of multiple sites and multiple researchers, extensive peer debriefing and the systematic overview of data for counter-examples and other anomalies.

## **3. Results**

Our results are reported in terms of the themes which emerged in data analysis.

### *Communicating the rules*

Official codes of conduct, those approved by the Library Boards, were available on the website of both library systems. Only Library A posted their rules of conduct in the actual libraries themselves, usually somewhere near the circulation desk.

The rules of conduct are posted on a large display that is to the left of the circulation desk. It is in a central location, near the elevator and escalator.  
(Field notes, Library A, Central, Researcher 2)

Posted rules could not always be seen from everywhere in the library and the print was so small as to be difficult to read from any distance or when posted too high. In both libraries, rules (either taken directly or derived from the code of conduct) that were

specific to particular materials or resources were posted directly on or beside the items to which they applied. For example, on the magazine shelves in one location a sign was posted which read “Some of our magazines are missing pages. Please help keep them whole so everyone can enjoy them.” (Field notes, Library A, Branch B, Researcher 3) In another location a “No unattended children” (Field notes, Library B, Central, Researcher 4) notice was posted in the children’s department.

### *Following the rules*

For the most part and across all locations, library users appeared to follow the rules of conduct. Our field notes are full of statements such as:

There are only two children and one mother in the children’s area. A few teens are around working. Some adults and seniors are browsing. Everyone is quite quiet. (Field notes, Library A, Branch B, Researcher 3)

The place is packed with teenagers – there is not a single unoccupied seat. Given the texts and notebooks on the tables, most of them appear to be working on schoolwork. Nobody is eating and, except for the odd bottle of water, I don’t see any beverages. Although the kids frequently speak with one another, they keep their voices low. (Field notes, Library A, Branch E, Researcher 1)

Generally everything is orderly and the noise only fluctuates with the number of people in the library. (Field notes, Library A, Branch A, Researcher 2)

I see a lot of well-behaved people. (Field notes, Library B, Central, Researcher 4)

The majority of library users engaged in library appropriate activities in a way that did not disrupt the use of the library for others. They lined up in an orderly manner at the circulation desks to check out materials, they quietly browsed through the stacks, they read newspapers and magazines in the comfy chairs in the reading areas, they studied and did research at work tables, they took turns using public access computers and did not seem to access pornographic materials via the Internet and they consumed only “covered” beverages and only ate in designated areas. As noted in the following field note excerpt, something magical seems to happen as people come into the library.

I hear some children outside the library in the hallway. They are rather loud and their voices echo in the large hallway. However, as soon as they enter the library they are quiet. There is a 4 year-old, a 2 year-old, and an infant carried by the mother.

Theory note: Even at a young age they know they should be quiet in the library. (Field notes, Library A, Branch C, Researcher 3)

### *Breaking the rules*

We did, however, also observe incidents of rule breaking. These were most frequently associated with the behaviour of children in the libraries. The following incidents are typical.

A small child (about 18 – 20 months) is running rapidly through the non-fiction shelves in the children’s area. She is smiling and laughing. Her mother is running after her, shouting “Gracie, Gracie – you can’t run in the library.” Gracie

continues to run, her mother continues to chase and chastise her. However, Mom doesn't stop Gracie. (Field notes, Library A, Branch E, Researcher 1)

The kids are still laughing and running and shouting through the stacks of books. "Douglas!" the mother calls. She doesn't get up though. (Field notes, Library B, Central, Researcher 4)

Many children in the children's area. All are making noise (running, yelling). The parents are all sitting together and chatting, ignoring the children's behaviour. (Field notes, Library A, Branch C, Researcher 3)

While the rules of conduct in both libraries did not allow for unattended children, we observed several incidents of young children being left alone while their caregivers left the building.

There was one girl who was very distraught when she saw her grandfather return. She began to cry. "I couldn't find you." "But I told you I was going to be back." He takes her hand and they walk out together. The girl was 8 or 9 years old. (Field notes, Library B, Central, Researcher 4)

While this incident is quite serious, leaving children unattended in the library more commonly took the form of leaving them in the children's area while using other parts of the library from which the children could not be seen or failing to supervise a child readily within an adult caregiver's sight even when that child was running, shouting or climbing on the furniture.

Teens were observed breaking rules around the public-use computer workstations. The following behaviour was typical.

The computer workstations are in popular demand for the 12-18 age group of patrons, and there is a fair amount of socialization going on in short bursts, particularly among the boys. There are a number of teens standing around the terminals 'observing' the people who are using them. The standing teens tended to move around a lot. (Field notes, Library B, Central, Researcher 4)

Observed incidents of adult rule breaking included overly loud conversations, cell phone use, and solicitation for charity. Additionally, several users were observed sleeping (one snoring loudly) at the Central branch of Library A.

#### *Bending or circumventing the rules*

Some users were adept at getting around many library rules of conduct. The teens described above who congregated around the computers, were also observed moving frequently, perhaps so as to appear not to be loitering overly long in one location and thereby draw attention to themselves. Other teens, both at the computers and at the study tables were adept at "looking busy" while actually engage in activities such as socializing or game playing which fall outside of the library's service mandate.

Four girls are studying at a nearby table. They each have a volume of an encyclopaedia in front of them as well as a notebook open for use and writing utensils. As I continue to observe them, I don't actually see much work being done. I move closer, pretending to be using the reference section. The girls are

actually talking about (what else?) boys! When I check in again half an hour later, they have still written nothing in their notebooks. This behaviour continues until quarter to nine, when they put away the encyclopaedias, pack up their gear and leave the library giggling. (Field notes, Library A, Branch E, Researcher 1)

Another tactic we observed for circumventing the rules was to be very, very quiet while doing so. For example, Researcher 4 saw a girl answer her cell phone, have a short, almost whispered conversation, and then make a similarly quiet outgoing call, all in an area of Branch B of Library B where cell phone use was not allowed. Not getting caught and immediate compliance when caught, were also user tactics that we observed.

The girls are running around and the librarian intervenes as she walks through the space. “Girls, girls” she says to get their attention. “Use your walking toes, OK?” They respond “OK,” but as soon as she’s gone they resume. They run to the far end of the stacks and return out of breath.” (Field notes, Library B, Central, Researcher 4)

As can be seen in the following incident, sometimes library users were observed to help one another circumvent the rules.

A young man (approximately 25 years of age) was at the circulation desk to ask a question when a woman (approximately 30 to 35 years of age) interrupts: “Excuse me. Could I just ask a question?” The man lets her. She asks the staff if she could use the phone but was told she could only use the payphone near the entrance. The woman then stated that staff had let her use it in the past. The man immediately offered to let her use his cell phone. She said: “Thanks. You’re sweet.” She followed him to another area near the entrance to make the phone call. She left a message to someone asking if they were coming and, if not, to call the library.

Theory note: Would the library take this sort of message? She was already told she could not use the phone. Now she’s using the circulation staff as her own personal messaging system.

(Field notes, Library A, Branch B, Researcher 3)

While staff enforced library policy by not allowing this patron to use the library phone, another user helped the patron to circumvent this rule by allowing her to use his phone. Further, the patron herself circumvented the rule by setting up a potential incoming call, behaviour over which library staff has little control.

### *Librarian enforcement strategies*

Library staff were seldom seen to actively enforce library rules of conduct. One exception occurred at the Central branch of Library A, a downtown location that is routinely monitored by security guards employed by the library.

A group of young adults (late teens) start yelling and a security guard and a library staff person run over to see what is going on. Some of the youths go up to the third floor and the rest go downstairs to the first floor. (Field notes, Library A, Central, Researcher 2)

For the most part, staff did not stray very far from information or circulation desks even when noise levels rose beyond what would allow for reasonable use of the library by all

patrons. Instead, staff appeared to use other strategies to enforce the rules of conduct and support appropriate behaviour in the library. As can be seen from the following example, making eye contact with a user was often enough to suppress marginally inappropriate behaviour.

Two boys are playing a game and talking loudly. The library staff member comes from the back of the magazine stacks where she is shelving material, makes eye contact with the boys, and then goes back to what she is doing. (Field notes, Library B, Branch B, Researcher 4)

Another technique used by library staff was to unobtrusively, semi-monitor areas by tidying tables or putting away materials.

#### *Design enforcement strategies*

In almost all locations, the layout of the facilities worked reasonably well to suppress or at least moderate potentially inappropriate behaviour. The location of shelving and other furniture usually allowed for clear sight lines from staffed service desks and thus for passive, ongoing monitoring of the premises. Children's departments were located in separate areas, often at the back or in a corner of the library, or close to the circulation desk, a naturally noisier area in most libraries. This served to minimize the impact of the noise made by the children on other library users.

#### *User enforcement strategies*

We observed many instances in which a library user misbehaved and another user was able to successfully correct or reprimand them, resulting in "proper" conduct and behaviour. Branch A of Library A was frequented by a large number of senior citizens, some of whom had little tolerance for noise. Seniors were routinely found reading newspapers and magazines in the reading area at the front of this branch.

When there is an outburst of noise, some of the older patrons either look out from behind their newspapers and register their disapproval (frown or hmmm) or simply make a disapproving noise from behind the paper. (Field notes, Library A, Branch A, Researcher 2)

Many library users made a point of being almost excessively quiet in the library, whispering when speaking to companions. Sometimes their voices so low that they could not be heard at all resulting in queries such as "What did you say?" or "Come again?" that were repetitive and annoying.

"Shushing" is often stereotypically associated with librarians. However, we did not see a single incident wherein a library staff member "shushed" a patron. Instead it was the library users themselves who "shushed" others in response to unruly and loud behaviour. The following incident is typical of the many we saw across all locations of both library systems.

As they are walking to the door, the two year-old gets on the chair in front of a catalogue. Mother: "No, you need to get off there. That's not for you." The child whines loudly and the mother and grandmother both "Shhh" at the same time (and quite loudly). (Field notes, Library B, Branch A, Researcher 4)

Shushing behaviour appears to be learned quite early as we saw several incidents of children (as young as about 7 years) “shushing” siblings or other children in the library.

#### *Non-enforcement tactics*

Both library staff and users deployed a variety of strategies to avoid enforcing library rules, the most common of which was simply to ignore inappropriate behaviour. As can be seen in the field note excerpts included above in the section on “Breaking the rules,” this was particularly true in regard to loud, rambunctious children. Librarians and library users not related to a disruptive child also were observed responding to disruptive behaviour in friendly, supportive ways.

Mom and child are at the desk. The lady at the checkout beside her strikes up a conversation and smiles. The staff at the desk are consoling to the mother. (Field notes, Library B, Branch A, Researcher 4)

Overall, the tendency for patrons, parents and staff to ignore loud, disruptive behaviour on the part of children seems to indicate that, regardless of the library’s rules concerning disruptive behaviour, everyone recognizes the special needs of children and everyone wants to work together to make the library experience a positive one for children.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

Libraries have developed policies and codes of conduct to govern acceptable use of facilities and services. Designed to ensure fair, equitable access for all, the policies encourage a quiet and safe environment which is respectful to all present. Library staff are usually regarded as the primary maintainers of these rules. In actual fact, however, our observations indicate the situation is more complex than evident in this normative description.

The majority of library users followed the posted rules of conduct. However, we also observed many incidents of rule breaking or rule bending, especially in the case of children’s behaviour. Staff were not often observed actively enforcing library rules. They used more passive strategies, relying on library design and making eye contact with patrons to informally monitor and contain user behaviour. It was the library users themselves who were more frequently seen intervening to negotiate the behaviour of others in the library. Sometimes, as evidenced in their “shushing,” these interventions served to curtail inappropriate behaviour. Library patrons also used a variety of tactics such as being very quiet, feigning library appropriate behaviour and moving around so as to avoid detection in order to circumvent rules. Finally, both staff and users often simply ignored rule violations. Overall, what emerged was an image of a carefully constructed dance, involving both library users and staff. Sometimes the steps moved the participants relatively far from the centre of the dance. Then a mutually understood choreography of how to negotiate that space, served to bring the dancers back to the core. This behaviour indicates that public libraries do function as a space where Goffman’s (1963) idea that behaviour in public places is governed by shared normative assumptions of public order appears to be operative. Both library users and staff used strategies to define and support legitimate ways for users to interact with the library and at the same time tactics to get around the limitations inherent in the defined legitimate behaviours. As such staff and users while in the library participated in the practice of everyday life as postulated by Certeau (1984). The results of this exploratory study contribute to our understanding of



the library as a complex public place where the behaviours used by library patrons and library staff serve to claim and re-construct that space to suit their own purposes.

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