

**The relationship between expectations and
the public's perceptions of
public library services**

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

Department of Information Studies



February 2000

Summary

A follow-up study to the 1995 ASLIB Public Libraries Review was conducted. Forty telephone interviews with frequent public library users and 6 focus groups with professional and paraprofessional library staff were carried out across three of the original nine ASLIB participant public library authorities. This two-stage data collection strategy was designed drawing on previous research ranging from services marketing to psychology.

Focusing particularly on a finding from the ASLIB research, which identified a mismatch in future expectations of the service between library users and professional library staff, the research examines the relationship between user expectations and perceptions of the public library service. The emphasis is placed not on what expectations and perceptions of the library service are, but rather how they are formed, what influences them and how they interact.

The research found that the library experience impacts significantly on the perceptions and expectations that are created of the service. The “snapshot” that a user forms during the service experience is crucial to the perception created and the subsequent expectation held. Similarly, internal and external factors ranging from family influence to the media, impact upon the way an individual experiences the library.

The personal nature of the library experience and the relationship formed with library staff was identified as influencing user perceptions of the service, with library staff having the potential to create and inform user service expectations. Confusion among library users and library staff in terms of their service perceptions and expectations was also noted with evidence to suggest that this was compounded by societal and technological changes.

Acknowledgements

Firstly I would like to thank the 40 public library users who were kind enough to give up their time to be interviewed for this research. Similarly my sincere thanks go to each of the participant library authorities, particularly those library staff who helped to organise and who contributed to the focus groups. Their participation and support has been vital to this project.

I also wish to extend my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Professor Bob Usherwood, for his continuous help, support and guidance throughout the three years of my Ph.D. In addition I would like to thank Richard Proctor for his help in organising my third year research seminar and Linda Simmons and everyone in the Department of Information Studies office for their role in organising me!

Finally, on a personal note, I wish to thank the following family and friends. My husband Graham, for his unconditional love, help, support, advice and encouragement. My parents, Irene and Terry Wiles for their encouragement and emotional and financial support throughout my years of study, also my parents-in-law for their support and tolerance and my good friend and fellow research student Louise Goodwin for always being available to offer her help and advice.

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Chapter 1 – “An Introduction and Background”

Background to the Research

Introducing the Public Libraries Review

In 1995 *ASLIB* published the Review of Public Library Services in England and Wales for the Department of National Heritage. This review looked at all aspects of the public library service, its current state, its future prospects and its profile with users and non-users of it. Its foreword describes it as:

“ . . . The largest piece of research into public libraries ever undertaken in the world.”

ASLIB (1995: foreword)

In reviewing the work, *Line (1996: 104)* observed:

“None of the reports has been as much heralded and as eagerly awaited as this one.”

As might be expected with a piece of research of this size the *ASLIB* Public Libraries Review (as it has since become known) received a mixed reception from members of the library community as is illustrated by The British Library’s, response to the Review published in the news section of the Journal *PROGRAM (1996: 183-184)*. Many observers questioned particularly the financial reality of some of its proposals, *Hopkins (1995: 187)* for example states:

“It is difficult to guess from reading the Public Libraries Review that the funding of public library services is nearing a state of crisis in many parts of the country.”

Yet a consensus of opinion could be found in the fact that the findings of the study, provide opportunities for further research and debate. *Line (1996: 109)* noted that:

“The review team does not claim to have produced the last word. Several issues are left open for discussion, and several doors have been left ajar.”

A news item appearing in *The Bookseller* (1995) magazine also commented that:

“Many of its recommendations will find instant favour in the public library community, while others rightly challenge that community to decide its stance in the face of the explosion of knowledge and of the new methods of access to information.”

Introducing the ASLIB mismatch

One of the findings of the Review was that users saw prospects of an improving public library service over the next five years whereas professional staff predicted service decline:

“Professional librarians expect that public libraries will deteriorate in the years ahead - perhaps anticipating the effects of financial stringency. The other four groups (frequent users, occasional users, non-users and other library staff) see prospects of continuing improvement.”
ASLIB (1995: 133)

This mismatch of opinion provided the inspiration for the present study. It is not a new finding. The seminal study by *Totterdell and Bird* (1976: 131) noted a dichotomy in service perception between service providers and service users:

“For the majority of the public there appears to be a considerable discrepancy between their perception of ‘the library’ and the librarian’s perceptions.”

More recently, reporting on the findings of the 1993 *Comedia* research, *Greenhalgh et al.* (1995: 3) noted evidence of a similar dichotomy in service user and service provider expectations and perceptions of the service:

“We wanted to look at public libraries in greater detail because, as outsiders, we regarded them as continuing to exhibit signs of considerable success: . . . But paradoxically, librarians saw things otherwise. They perceived continuing – in some cases even terminal – crisis.”

The decision to investigate this mismatch of opinion in greater detail was based upon a consideration of the implications that the perception – expectation relationship has for service management, and in particular service quality. Understanding user perceptions and expectations are central to the services marketing approach pioneered by *Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988)* via the SERVQUAL model. This will be discussed in greater detail in due course. The generic services marketing literature (*Zeithaml and Bitner 1996*) makes a direct link between user expectations and perceptions and service management. *Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990: 51)* observe that:

“Knowing what customers expect is the first and possibly most critical step in delivering quality service.”

Understanding the relationship between user expectations and perceptions has been identified as important for effective service management. This project therefore has practical implications in terms of effective service management, service promotion, service quality, customer care and staff training. Furthermore understanding the differences between the expectations and perceptions of different user groups, between different levels of staff, and between users and staff is essential for a service such as the public library service that faces a challenging future in which service role and direction could be redefined.

The Research Aims

Previous work (for example, *ASLIB 1995, Comedia 1993 & 1995* and *Totterdell and Bird 1976*) has identified what users’ perceptions of the service are. It suggests that perceptions of the service are formed from a low expectation base resulting in favourable perceptions being easily created when expectations are met or exceeded. In the library literature *Prins and de Gier (1995: 21)* note:

“Where there is a certain pattern of expectation concerning the quality of library services it is usually on the low side.”

It is a pattern that has also been noted on a wider scale of services in general, as *Millson-Martula and Menon (1995: 36)* observe:

“Researchers in the field of customer expectations agree that, in most cases, customers hold expectations that can be considered quite basic.”

The present project was concerned, not so much with what perceptions and expectations are of the public library service, as there is already a wealth of evidence about this in the form of these previous studies noted above. Rather, this project aimed to go that one step further and considers:

How perceptions of the public library service are formed.

What influences these perceptions?

How do perceptions of the service interact with users’ expectations of it?

What is the relationship between user perceptions and expectations and those of library staff?

The reasons for the mismatch in future expectations identified by the *ASLIB* research.

Totterdell and Bird (1976: 130) observed in their report on public library effectiveness that:

“Studying the relationship between output and need proved to be far less straightforward than had been anticipated partly because of the existence of a range of apparent ‘barriers’. These are factors such as attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, expectations and library experience.”

It is precisely these ‘barriers’ that this research aimed to consider in greater depth to gain better understanding of public library use. Thus from the starting point of the *ASLIB* mismatch of opinion between professional library staff and the other stakeholding groups, the research focus was expanded. The study of the formation of public library user perceptions and expectations became the primary research aim, leading to an understanding of the secondary aim of seeking reasons for the differences in staff and customer perceptions as identified by *ASLIB*.

From these research aims the following key research questions that the study seeks to answer have been formulated:

- How are users' expectations of the public library service formed and influenced?
- What impact does the service experience have on public library user perceptions?
- What is the relationship between users' expectations and perceptions of the public library service?
- What role do library staff have in the formation of users' expectations and perceptions?
- How does an understanding of public library users' expectations and perceptions of the service contribute to understanding the mismatch of opinion identified by the *ASLIB (1995)* research?

Understanding Perceptions and Expectations

As concepts, perceptions and expectations are often confused. The two are closely related and as such their use tends to be interchanged in conversation. This was certainly the experience during this research where respondents talked about their expectations and perceptions as being one and the same thing. In one of the focus groups conducted for the research one respondent had sought the dictionary definitions for clarification and started the group discussion by presenting them.

This confusion is not surprising as the relationship between expectations and perceptions is such that perception impacts upon expectations created, and expectation impacts on perceptions created. Thus to gain a better understanding of perceptions and expectations their dictionary definitions are a good place to start.

The Oxford Dictionary (1983) defines the verb “perceive” as:

“To become aware of, to see or notice.”

Perception is defined as:

“Perceiving, ability to perceive.”

The verb, expect is defined by the same dictionary as:

“1. To think or believe that (a person or thing) will come or that (a thing) will happen. 2. To wish for and be confident that one will receive, to consider necessary. 3. To think, to suppose.”

The noun “expectation” is defined as:

“1. Expecting looking forward to with hope or pleasure. 2. A thing that is expected to happen. 3. The probability that a thing will happen.”

However, whilst dictionary definitions clarify the meanings of the words, to understand the importance of the perceptual and expectation processes requires deeper consideration as *Hastorf et al. (1970: 3)* observe:

“Both philosophers and psychologists have long been intrigued with the nature of the human perceptual process. One explanation for their interest is that man is naturally curious about his contact with the outside world and wonders how his experiences are caused and to what degree they reflect the world accurately.”

Philosophically the relationship between expectation and perception can be identified in the work of Karl Popper, particularly his philosophies on the relationship between experience, knowledge and observation, *Wisdom (1987: 72)* explains:

“Popper holds that we always approach the world with a host of expectations. Such expectations include our traditional beliefs, our false beliefs – in short all of our ideas, however bizarre, about the world. We move about our business in the world with these expectations, until we receive a shock in the form of an observation that conflicts with some expectations.”

Thus, the potential emphasis of perception and expectation in shaping our social interaction becomes evident. This is particularly the case because perception and expectation shape our attitudes (Jonas et al., 1995) and decisions (Eiser and van der Pligt, 1988), behaviour (Hinton, 1993) and impact on our cognitive processes (Augoustinos and Walker, 1995) at the most basic and fundamental levels, Quinton in Warnock (1967: 65) suggests:

“Ultimately the problem of perception is that of relation of thought or language to the world.”

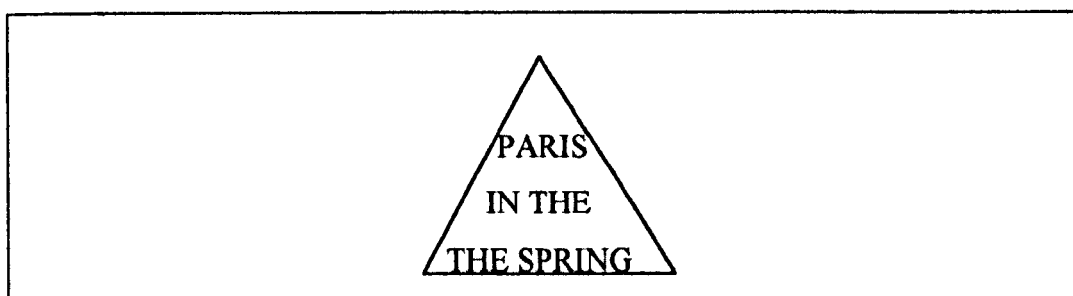
Therefore the dictionary definitions can be given a greater contextual meaning. Rice (1997: 29), for example, defines perception in the following way:

“Perception is the term used to cover those processes which give coherence, unity and meaning to a person’s sensory input. It involves all those processes that we use to select, sort, organize and interpret sensory data to make a meaningful and coherent picture of ‘our world’.”

Rice (1997: 38) also considers the perception – expectation relationship noting that:

“Expectation is another crucial determinant of what we perceive. Indeed, it may not be unreasonable to claim that people often perceive what they expect to perceive rather than the message they do receive.”

The following example can be used to illustrate this relationship:



The words in the triangle are read by many as “*Paris in the spring*” because, as a well-known phrase, that is what they are expected to read, whereas the words in the triangle actually read “*Paris in the the spring*”. The perception is distorted by what is expected.

This example does not only illustrate a relationship between expectation and perception but also illustrates the potential powers that perceptions and expectations have. This potential is widely noted in the literature (for example Cook, 1979; Bromley, 1993 and Augoustinos and Walker, 1995) particularly in terms of the implications that perception and expectation formation have for social norms and stereotyping. As the discussion in chapter 3 illustrates, the impact of stereotyping has particular significance for a public library service and profession that has long been the subject of unfavourable stereotypes, that for some potential users may form a perceptual barrier to service use.

Considering Service Quality

An understanding of perception and expectation in our social existence makes it easier to understand the implications that perception and expectation might have for services, not least for service quality. The service quality literature defines perceptions in the following way:

“Customer perceptions are subjective assessments of actual service experiences.”

Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 37)

The same authors note:

“Customer expectations are the standards of, or reference points for, performance against which service experiences are compared, and are often formulated in terms of what a customer believes should or will happen.”

Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 37)

The perceptions that are created of a service during service use, and the subsequent expectations that they perpetuate, and the expectations that are held of a service and the preconceived perceptions that they can create, have wide ranging implications for service management. This is because they will influence initial service use, continued service use and perceived service quality, relevance and value. As *Carman (1990: 51)* illustrates:

“In order to really manage quality in service industries, we need to marry our notions of quality as a customer perception with technical quality.”

The focus on service users or customers and perceptions of service quality has its origins, in the popularity through the 1980s of Total Quality Management (TQM). The application of TQM, as perpetuated by management gurus such as *Peters and Austin (1986)*, to the service sector grew in popularity through the late 1980s and into the 1990s via initiatives such as retail best practice. By the early 1990s a wealth of articles discussing the merits and applications of total quality could be found in the management journals (for example: *Spencer, 1994; Tuckman, 1994 and Waldman, 1994*).

Coupled with initiatives such as the *Citizens' Charter (1991)*, Charter Mark and a whole host of other quality awards and standards (including IIP, ISO9000 and Business Excellence) it was inevitable that the merits of service quality would be considered and adopted across library and public services. *Morgan and Murgatroyd (1995)* and *Gaster (1995)* consider quality and total quality for public sector services. *Holt (1996)*, *Cundari and Stutz (1995)* and *Kinnell (1995)* all explore applications of total quality to a library and information service setting.

Understanding the relationship between user perceptions and expectations has been identified as being of paramount importance to achieving total quality. Particular importance has been paid to harnessing the potential of this relationship by the research of *Parasuraman Zeithaml and Berry (1985; 1988 and 1990)*. The central focus of their research has been the SERVQUAL model for service quality (1988). This model is offered as a mechanism for practically

assessing service quality via the measurement of customer expectations and perceptions and the gap that exists between them. To achieve this, the gap between customer expectations and perceptions is measured by administering 22 items across 5 dimensions of service quality: tangibles; reliability; responsiveness; assurance and empathy.

Subsequent research (*Bitner, 1990; Bolton and Drew, 1991 (a) and Carman, 1990*) has considered the practicalities of understanding service users' perceptions and expectations in the assessments that are made of service quality via the disconfirmation paradigm. This paradigm states that where actual service perceptions meet and / or exceed service expectation customer satisfaction with the service will result. Where they do not, the result is customer dissatisfaction with the service. As *Bitner (1990: 70)* argues:

“Each individual customer is assumed to have expectations about how each individual service / product will perform. These expectations are compared with actual perceptions of performance as the product / service is consumed. If expectations exceed performance, dissatisfaction results. When expectations are met or when performance actually exceeds expectations, satisfaction results.”

However, *Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988: 17)* hold that, whilst recognising the importance of the disconfirmation paradigm, expectations can be defined differently for service quality than they are when considering customer satisfaction. According to these writers the customer satisfaction research considers expectations as predictions where as:

“In contrast, in the service quality literature, expectations are viewed as desires or wants of consumers, i.e., what they feel a service provider should offer rather than would offer.”

This research has considered both definitions and drawn on elements of both the service quality research with the SERVQUAL model (*Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988*) in particular informing the research although not being fundamental to it, and the relationship between expectation and perception as defined by the disconfirmation paradigm. In understanding how perception and

expectation interact to motivate service use and perpetuate continued service use, both areas of research have proved valuable.

Understanding the Public Library Service Context

The public library service has over recent years been operating in a public sector that has been described as a “*turbulent environment*” where “*change and instability appear endemic*”, (Leach et al, 1994: 234). Not only have public libraries been experiencing the harsh financial realities shared by many other public sector organisations, they have, over the last decade, faced the challenges presented by the increased consumerism of society and the new opportunities for technology in information provision and entertainment. This has been characterised by a rise in the availability of home information provision and entertainment with the ever increasing popularity (and decreasing price) of the Internet and PCs, hardware and software. Increasingly, I.T plays a role in our daily lives and with increased familiarity comes decreased “technophobia” and increased curiosity.

Similarly, the nature and shape of society is changing. There is a raised emphasis on the consumer with all of us becoming more aware of our rights as both customers and citizens. Transience in employment and an increased pattern of short-term contractual working, along with debates about violence in society and the changed nature and definition of family, has affected the shape and make up of the communities at which the public library has traditionally been at the heart. In describing this as characteristic of a shift towards a post-modern society Ranson and Stewart (1994: 9) state:

“The trends towards differentiation that characterise post-modern society create space for innovation and change, yet also threaten to undermine the very possibility of ‘society’. Social fragmentation threatens the co-operation and thrust that define a community and create the possibility of collective action without which any society cannot shine.”

In an effort to rise to such complex challenges that threaten to affect not only patterns and types of use of the public library service, but also create difficult questions to be addressed in terms of defining library role into the next millennium, the service has turned increasingly to the management tools of the private sector. As *Kinnell Evans (1997(b): 2)* observes:

“Providing high quality services has always been the role of library and information managers: now, however, greater competition for resources, the rising expectations of funders and clients and the increasing complexity of information provision from a variety of new providers, mean that management skills must match these more intense demands on and threats to library and information services.”

As has been noted, there has been an increased emphasis in the library literature on the use of management tools such as SERVQUAL and TQM. Most recently the Business Excellence Model has been used to develop the Library and Information Sector Improvement Matrix and Model (LISIM) (*Kinnell Evans et al, 1999*) for quality self-assessment specific to library and information services. This increased emphasis on understanding public service users’ perceptions to aid service management and assessment indicates the relevance of this research project. Seeking to gain a greater understanding of those factors that shape and influence public library users’ service perceptions and expectations, and the relationship between user and staff perceptions of the service and service quality is entirely relevant.

As has been outlined different areas of literature have informed the research study, in particular the exploration of the formation of user expectations and perceptions. There are six key strands, which together form the basis of the literature used, although that is not to imply that these strands are definitive given the wide variety of sources used. Broadly these strands encompass:

1. Service quality, including services marketing which focuses specifically on the role of expectations and perceptions to service quality, and the different quality management tools and systems available. (For example: *Carman, 1990; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988; Skelcher, 1992; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996*).

2. Psychology, including attitudes, behaviour and a deeper understanding of the formation of perceptions and expectations at the most basic functional level. (For example: *Augoustinos and Walker, 1995; Bromley, 1993; Schneider, 1995*).
3. Consumer behaviour, including understanding consumer behaviour and decision making. (For example: *Bitner, 1990; Bolton and Drew 1991 (a); Rice, 1997*).
4. Methodological, specifically relating to the data collection techniques used and conducting research in a library and information service setting. (For example: *Mellon, 1990; Oppenheim, 1992; Thomas and Purdon, 1997; Frey and Oishi 1995; Groves and Lyberg, 1988*).
5. Contextual, previous user studies were used to inform the research and to give its findings context. (For example: *ASLIB, 1995; Comedia 1993; Totterdell and Bird, 1976*).
6. Environmental, literature relating specifically to library and information services and in particular public libraries, this includes literature from the professional press. (For example: *Kinnell and Oda, 1996; Nitecki, 1996; Holt, 1996; Kovel-Jarboe, 1996; Astbury 1994; Batt, 1999*).

Introducing the Research and its Findings

The implications of understanding the perception – expectation relationship is contextualised by its role in service quality and services marketing. The importance of service quality for the public library service as it faces a new millennium is underpinned by the changing society in which the public library exists and serves. These themes are explored in detail by this research. The shape and form of this thematic discussion of the research data are indicated below.

Chapter 2 – “Methodology”

Chapter 2 discusses the methodology of the research. It presents the participant authorities and details the research instruments and methods of data collection

used, and discusses their appropriateness to this particular study. Details of the analysis process are also presented, as is an evaluation of the research experience.

Chapter 3 – “Experiencing the Service”

The first of the thematic chapters discussing the research findings, this chapter concentrates on the psychology of perception and expectation formation. This chapter also examines the uniqueness of experience due to its personal nature and emphasis, and discusses some of the external and internal factors that the research interviews identified as impacting upon library experience and the ultimate implications of these for perception and expectation formation. The psychology of perception and expectation formation is discussed in greater detail by the consideration of stereotypes and their impact on image, and organisational reputation.

Chapter 4 – “Responding to a Changing Society”

This chapter presents the research findings in relation to the changes in society that have been identified as possibly impacting upon public library role and use, and as such perceptions and expectations of the service. Particular emphasis is placed on the move towards a consumer society in terms of consumer expectations of a public sector service and as such the need to consider expectations and perceptions in a service quality context to ensure continued service relevance in an increasingly competitive leisure and information market place. Similarly the impact of technology is considered, as the expectation and perception relationship differed in this area compared to other aspects of the service. This chapter discusses the implications of these changes for public library role.

Chapter 5 – “Confused Perceptions: Cutting edge but warm and fluffy, please!”

Closely linked to chapter 4, chapter 5 considers the confusion in perception and expectation identified by the research in relation to a changing society. It considers the challenges that confusion among user groups, individual users and staff presents for the public library service and details the need to strike the right

balance. This is especially the case in balancing the traditional book based and community orientation of the service against the new technological opportunities that are available for it to pursue. This sense of perceptual confusion is also considered against other influencing factors identified by the research as adding to the confusion in perceptions and expectations existing of the service.

Chapter 6 – “Library Staff: Perception Creators and Expectation Managers”

With the previous chapters presenting a greater understanding of public library users’ service perceptions and expectations, what influences them, their interaction and how they are formed, this chapter considers the research evidence relating to library staff. It explores the role of library staff for harnessing the potential of the expectation relationship via service quality to the library’s advantage. It considers staff in terms of the expectations and perceptions that exist of them, and the relationship that users identify between staff and library. The chapter begins the consideration of the practical implications of the research as the potential for library staff to become perception creators and expectation managers is explored.

Chapter 7 – “Conclusions: Harnessing the potential and rising to the Challenges”

The thesis concludes by reviewing the research findings, considering their practical implications and possible directions for future research. A series of diagrams are presented to provide greater understanding of the perception – expectation relationship, its cyclical nature and the interaction of perception and expectation between user and library, staff and library and user and staff.

This chapter also returns to the beginning and presents the conclusions that have been drawn from the research findings on the *ASLIB* mismatch. Finally this chapter introduces the Perception Creation Expectation Management Model (PCEM) which has been formulated from the research findings. This model is presented to illustrate the practical implications of the research and the potential directions in which future research could be pursued.

Chapter 2 – “Methodology”

Introduction

As a follow up study to the 1994/5 *ASLIB* research, this research was conducted with the co-operation of four of the original nine *ASLIB* participant authorities. The original *ASLIB* data for each of the authorities was available for cross analysis where appropriate. One of the authorities acted as a pilot for the research instruments that were designed for each stage of the data collection. The other three authorities formed the main study. At the request of one authority it was agreed that their anonymity be maintained. Therefore, throughout this, and subsequent chapters of the thesis, they will be identified simply as Authority A, Authority B and Authority C. Each of these authorities reflects a different type of local authority and they include a London borough, a Metropolitan and a County council. As such each serves a very different community and subsequently addresses very different community needs.

The fieldwork for the research was conducted in two distinct stages. Firstly, telephone interviews were conducted with frequent service users. These were then followed by focus groups with library staff in each authority. In collecting the data, the research focused on a qualitative approach with the aim of formulating a grounded theory or theories (*Glaser and Strauss, 1967*). The literature, for example *Busha and Harter (1980)* and *Mellon (1990)*, supports the application of a qualitative methodology for research in a library and information service setting. Furthermore, the use of qualitative data maintains the focus of the research on people. Thoughts and feelings, perceptions and expectations being uniquely personal are not easily quantified, expressed in terms of statistical significance. Nor, as *Kirk and Miller (1986:12)* describe are statistics and numbers always best:

“Most critically qualitative research involves sustained interaction with people being studied in their own language and on their own turf. Less important is whether or not, or at what level of sophistication, numbers are employed to reveal patterns of social life.”

This chapter will consider each stage of the data collection in terms of the research instruments designed and used, their appropriateness to the study, and against the other research tools available. It will discuss how the research was conducted at each stage of the fieldwork and consider the design of the research instruments in terms of their relationship to previous research and the literature. An outline of the analysis process will be presented and finally the research experience will be evaluated.

Data collection

Stage One: User Telephone Interviews

As already detailed, the *ASLIB* research found a mismatch in future expectations for the service between professional staff and frequent service users, occasional service users and non-users. It was decided that this research would concentrate on one of these groups so that an in-depth study could be made. As it could be assumed that frequent users of the service would have the most realistic expectations and perceptions of it, it was decided that this would be the group focused on in each authority. Frequent users were those who identified themselves to the *ASLIB* study as using the public library service at least once a month or more. The sample that was generated by *ASLIB* was revisited for this study. Every frequent user identified by *ASLIB* in each of the participant authorities was approached to take part. As such users of central, branch and mobile service points were interviewed across the authorities. Using the existing *ASLIB* sample allowed the present research to employ questions on the telephone interview schedule that could be directly compared with answers respondents had given to the 1994 research. Therefore, changes in expectations and perceptions of the service could be examined directly and possible reasons for any changes

explored. This gave the research a direct frame of reference from which to explore user perceptions and expectations and it was primarily for this reason that the *ASLIB* sample was revisited rather than a new sample constructed. Furthermore, the use of the available *ASLIB* sample also eliminated the problem of non-response due to lack of interest in the subject matter. However, it should be noted that contacting this existing sample did pose one problem. Those participating in the research were self-selecting, and may have been influenced to take part because they possess particular strong feelings and opinions about the public library service in general or in their area.

Potential Respondents to this research were approached first by post (using the contact address given on the *ASLIB* home interview schedule). This initial contact allowed introduction of the researcher, the project and its aims. Respondents were asked to supply a telephone number *if* they were prepared to participate in the research. A form and stamped addressed return envelope were provided for respondents to do this. A follow up call was then made to discuss the research with the respondent. The literature suggests this is a particularly important part of the research process as any concerns about the research can be discussed with respondents before the interview commences:

“Part of the respondents reaction will be towards the nature and volume of the data being sought. Feelings of suspicion and a sense of privacy are common but can be limited by a careful preliminary explanation of what the questionnaire is about and the purposes to which the result will be put.” Glastonbury and MacKean (1991: 237)

During this preliminary phone call a convenient time for interview was arranged with the respondent. Using the telephone made it easier for interviews to be conducted at the date and time request of respondents. It helped to accommodate requests for later evening and earlier morning interviews. The response rates may have been aided by using telephone interviews because removing the face-to-face contact may have made the interview situation safer in the respondent's own mind. In addition, through the initial postal contact and preliminary phone call, rapport was established between respondent and interviewer before the interview. Lawlor (1994: 42) emphasises the importance of establishing such

rapport between interviewer and interviewee:

"The interviewer must be able to convey both friendly and professional manners; the interviewer must 'smile on the phone.'" Lawlor (1994: 42)

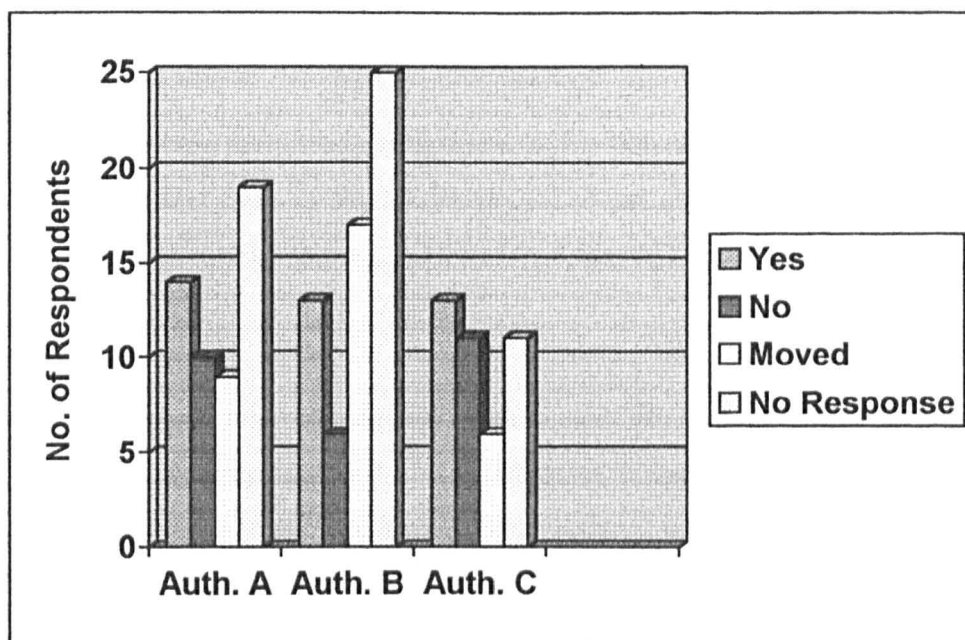
Response rates

The interview schedule used was tested with seven respondents in the pilot authority. As the schedule proved successful in every interview this was considered to be an appropriate test sample. Subsequently only minor alterations were made to the way question probes were worded and organised before the schedule was used in the main study. Following the pilot however, changes were made to the way in which interviews were requested. Every potential respondent in each authority was contacted by post. The initial positive responses were followed up and interviews arranged and conducted. When responses began to diminish usually after about 4 weeks (although varying in each authority) a second mailing was conducted to potential respondents who had failed to answer the first research request. Full details of the letters used to contact respondents can be found in Appendix B. Given that there has been a three to four year gap between the *ASLIB* research and this study, there was some concern that response rates would not be low. As the literature suggests:

"Non response is perhaps the most inscrutable of survey errors. Many other survey errors can at least be dealt with." Groves and Lyberg (1988: 191)

Figure 1 below shows the response rates to the telephone interview achieved across the three main study authorities.

Figure 1 - Response Rates to Telephone Interview Request in Main Study Authorities



It was hoped to achieve a positive response target of 25 per cent in each authority. As *figure 1* illustrates this was successfully achieved in Authorities A and C. Following two mailings in Authority A to 52 potential frequent user respondents the positive response rate was 27 per cent. A negative response to the interview request of 19.2 per cent was recorded. 17.3 per cent of requests were returned as respondent having moved or “gone away” leaving a total non-response percentage of 36.5.

In Authority B the sample size was larger, with 61 frequent users to approach. Following two mailings in this authority the positive response rate achieved was 21.3 per cent. 9.8 per cent of the interview requests were declined. In this authority a comparatively high percentage, 27.9 per cent, of requests were returned as respondent having moved or “gone away”. It is possible that the particular problems of declining industry and its associated unemployment problems may have contributed to the transience of the population. The total non-response recorded in Authority B was 41 per cent.

In Authority C a smaller sample of 41 potential respondents was available. From this sample a positive response of 31.7 per cent was achieved. 26.8 per cent of potential respondents declined the interview request and in a marked contrast to Authority B, 14.6 per cent were returned due to respondent having moved or “gone away”. This left a total non-response of 26.8 per cent.

Thus, across the three main study authorities, of the potential respondents identified as frequent users in the *ASLIB* study 20.8 per cent had moved away from the area. Of those remaining, 32.8 per cent agreed to participate in the study.

Although information was collected about each individual respondent including age, gender and ethnicity details, it was decided not to use this information to profile the respondents in each authority. This decision was made after consideration and analysis of the data collected by the research. No particular patterns were observed in terms of respondent age, gender, ethnicity or other defining personal details. Respondents were quite simply individual public library users. As such, presenting respondent profile information was considered unnecessary, as no added value would be given to the data presented. Similarly, therefore, when respondents are quoted directly in the thesis they are identified only by their Authority.

Why telephone interviews?

The decision to use a telephone methodology was made due to a number of factors, including the diverse geographic location of respondents, both between and within authorities. As *Thomas and Purdon (1997)* state:

“The main attraction of telephone interviewing is that it enables data to be collected from geographically scattered samples more cheaply and quickly than by field interviewing, but avoids the well-known limitations of postal surveys.”

The literature (*Frey, 1989; Frey and Oishi, 1995; Groves and Lyberg, 1988; Lawlor, 1994* and *Thomas and Purdon, 1997*) indicated the appropriateness of a telephone methodology for an interview lasting between 20 and 45 minutes.

Longer interviews can sometimes be problematic in terms of maintaining respondent interest but *Frey and Oishi (1995: 37)* also indicate that:

“Interviews of up to 50 minutes in length can be successfully conducted by telephone. Once the interviewer is past the introductory statements and into the first questions of the interview, length does not seem to be a problem. Respondents will complete the interview apparently losing track of time.”

It is suggested by the literature (*Groves et al. (1988); Kieker and Nelson (1996); Lawlor (1994)*) that one of the major disadvantages of telephone interviews for data collection is the hostility that can be encountered when ‘cold calling’ is involved. This is a technique that is particularly common in the field of market research where electronic random dialling is used to generate a sample of respondents to interview about a given product or service. For this study the researcher had the advantage of having a ready available sample of respondents to contact, therefore eliminating cold calling and its associated problems.

Using telephone interviews allowed the collection of qualitative data whilst avoiding the expense, problems, and safety implications, created by face-to-face interviews. At the same time, the telephone interview also allowed the researcher to gather data on a personal one-to-one basis with respondents as would be achieved in a face-to-face interview situation and as such to benefit from the ability to gain instant clarification or request more detail from respondents. As *Marshall and Rossman (1995:80)* suggest:

“Interviews have particular strengths. An interview is a useful way to get large amounts of data quickly . . . Immediate follow-up and clarification are possible.”

Similarly *Seay et al. (1996: 466)* suggests that respondents themselves prefer an interview technique:

“People are often more amenable to answering questions in person than on paper; there is greater spontaneity in the responses; and answers are more complete and revealing than questionnaire answers.”

Furthermore, as face-to-face interviews had been used by the *ASLIB* research this also maintained a certain level of consistency in the methodologies used by the two studies. Research indicates that there is little to choose between face-to-face and telephone interviews both in terms of the response rates that can be expected and the quality of the data that they yield.

“Only small differences were found between telephone and face-to-face interviews. Furthermore, it was found that these differences have become smaller over time. Since the mode effects are small, other factors such as preferences and accessibility of respondents and costs may be more important for an individual researcher deciding which method is best.”
de Leeuw and Van der Zauwen. (1988: 296-7)

As a piece of empirical research focusing on concepts that are not easily defined and based on personal experience, re-use of an interview method of some form was regarded as essential. Therefore, other possible methods of data collection were instantly ruled out. A postal questionnaire for example, would not have allowed for the necessary volume of qualitative data to be easily collected. The *ASLIB* research did make use of a postal questionnaire with users so in terms of maintaining consistency between the research this would have been a viable option for the present research. However, as well as the identified need for some form of interview to be used, a postal questionnaire was ruled out for other practical reasons. The literature (*Babbie, 1990; Glastonbury and MacKean, 1991; Oppenheim, 1992*) highlights the potential problems of using a postal questionnaire. Of particular concern to this research was the fact that this method could not ensure the targeted respondent participated in the research. Whilst a postal questionnaire would have been easily administered the disadvantages of postage costs and the problem of poor response rates were also considered to make this an unsuitable method of data collection to employ for this research. A methodology requiring “tick box responses” would also limit detail and thus the richness of the data collected. The telephone interview used, in contrast, allowed respondents to vocalise their opinions freely without any limitation, hence the variety experienced in interview duration.

Telephone interview schedule

The research instrument was designed to reflect factors identified in the literature as having an impact on the formation of an individual's perceptions and their interaction with that individual's expectations of a service. The literature search made use of sources from a wide range of areas including, consumer behaviour (for example: *Bitner 1990, Bolton and Drew 1991 and Rice 1997*). Marketing (for example: *Doherty et al. 1995*). Social psychology, (for example: *Augoustinos et al. 1995, Bromley 1993 and Schneider 1995*). Services marketing (for example: *Carman 1990, Cronin and Taylor 1992, Parasuraman et al. 1988, Zeithaml and Bitner 1996*). Total Quality Management (for example *St Clair 1997*) and public sector management (for example: *Cutler and Waine 1994, Fenwick 1995, Flynn 1993, Gaster 1995, Seay et al. 1996*). As well as that literature specific to the library field (for example: *Cundari and Stutz 1995, Edwards and Browne 1995 and Nitecki 1996*).

Before each interview an introductory statement was used to confirm respondents were still willing to participate in the research. This also outlined what the interview would involve. Permission to tape-record the interview and to quote from the conversation in any written work resulting from the research was also obtained at this stage. All respondents interviewed agreed to these requests. Interviews were tape-recorded for transcription at a later date, although during each interview additional notes were taken to aid the transcription process and to minimise any technical problems that might be encountered in the recording process.

The interview schedule was made up of four sections. Of these three used open-ended questions with probes employed to draw additional information from respondents. As *Oppenheim (1992: 112)* suggests: "*The chief advantage of the open question is the freedom it gives to respondents*", a factor considered essential to a piece of research concerned chiefly with respondents expectations and perceptions, which are not easily quantifiable by yes and no answers.

The first section of the schedule referred respondents directly to their 1994 expectations for the future of the public library service. Respondents were

reminded of the view they had expressed in 1994/5 (either; *will deteriorate, will stay the same, will improve or don't know*), and asked why they might have felt that way then. Despite the element of recall involved, this question yielded some very rich data as respondents recounted their feelings about the service then and expressed why opinions had changed or concerns reinforced since then. In most instances it was found that respondents had very clear opinions about the views they had expressed to the 1994/5 research. These will be discussed in detail in the following thematic chapters of the thesis.

The first section of the interview also included a series of questions relating to the respondent's "library habit" and how it was formed. These questions were employed to consider the role of factors such as parental influence and education experience on the perceptions and expectations that are held of the public library service. These are factors that the social psychology (for example, *Augoustinos and Walker, 1995*) and consumer (for example, *Rice, 1997*) literature indicate will impact on how perceptions are formed. As *Hastorf et al. (1970:9)* state: "*Our past learning has a significant influence on perception.*"

The data collected by the first section of the telephone interview complemented the *ASLIB* data available on users' library use and book borrowing habits. Respondents were also asked if they used any library services other than those provided by their local public library authority. This question was employed to consider the issue of experience and gather evidence as to whether experience of other library services, could be seen to have any influence on the expectations and perceptions expressed of the public library service.

The second section contained twelve five point Likert scaled items. These items were designed to establish respondents' perceptions and expectations of the public library service across a variety of issues including staff, information technology, opening hours, library role and function and the future direction of the service. Each item was designed, not only to elicit the strength of opinion in terms of a scaled response, but also, through a series of probes, to discover how or why this opinion was formed. Therefore the respondent was asked to express an expectation for or perception of the service and then asked why they had that

perception or expectation. The statements used were taken and adapted from the literature, with wording changed to avoid bias and make each statement more accessible and relevant to respondents. All jargon terms were removed and statements were placed into the first person to make them easily understood.

Each of the twelve items using a Likert scaled response had to be considered in terms of social desirability bias. That is to say that some issues have been identified by previous research experience, to be issues that people feel they have to respond to in a certain way to give a socially acceptable answer. *Oppenheim (1992: 138-9)* illustrates this problem by the following examples:

“Some people will claim that they read more than they do, bathe more often than is strictly true and fill more pipes from 1 ounce of tobacco than would seem likely. They claim that they buy new tyres for their car when in fact they buy retreads; they deny reading certain Sunday newspapers of dubious repute; the clothes they buy are expensive; they would seem to make donations to charity with great frequency and to visit museums almost every week!”

Only one Likert item was considered to be problematic in terms of the social desirability of responses to it and that was Q2.8 *“Library users as a whole reflect a middle class bias.”* Respondents in general paused to consider their response to this slightly longer than at the other statements, but the diversity of answers given suggest that answers biased by social desirability were limited. Furthermore, the fact that each Likert statement was accompanied by a “why?” probe meant that all responses were qualified by respondents, again limiting the affects of any social desirability bias. The literature also suggests that when compared to in-person interviews the affects of social desirability bias are diminished by the use of a telephone methodology:

“Both types of interview suffer from socially desirable responses; however, the problem is most prominent during in-person interviews. This is because the interviewer's sheer physical presence combined with visible characteristics, such as age or race, may influence the respondent's comment more than the removed voice on the telephone.”
Frey and Oishi (1995: 37)

The inclusion of a Likert scaled section also allowed for the collection of quantitative data to be used alongside the qualitative data. As the literature indicates:

“In many instances, both forms of data are necessary – not quantitative used to test qualitative but both used as supplements, as mutual verification and as different forms of data on the same subject, which, when compared will each generate theory.”
Glaser and Strauss (1967: 18)

The use of Likert scaled questions across one section of the telephone interview schedule not only provided quantitative data but the discussion of the Likert response itself generated more qualitative data. It is emphasised however, that the quantitative analysis of the Likert scale responses and other areas of the telephone interview schedule were limited to simple analysis. A sample size of 40 is too small to be of statistical significance. For example the cell sizes are not large enough to carry out χ^2 testing. Therefore trends indicated by the quantitative analysis of the fieldwork should be considered with this caveat in mind.

The third section of the interview schedule concerned personal information. This was obtained to determine any external mediating factors that might impact on respondents' perceptions and to complement and confirm data already available in the *ASLIB* study. Questions here were kept to a minimum as age; income; employment and ethnicity details were available via the original *ASLIB* data. Respondents were asked to detail any major changes in circumstance, such as changes in employment or marital status, and also to detail any major changes in the way that they use the library service now as compared to 1994/5. These questions were deemed necessary to ascertain reasons for any changes in “library habit” since the 1994 research, but were purposely kept to a minimum in order to respect respondent privacy given the information already available. It was made clear to respondents that they did not have to answer these questions if they preferred not to. However, most respondents were prepared to give the necessary details, their willingness perhaps aided by the fact that this section was placed towards the end of the interview allowing a rapport to be established between

respondent and interviewer by this point. This section of the interview also asked about television viewing preferences and preferred newspapers. These questions were asked in order to examine the impact of external factors, such as media influence, on expectation and perception formation of the public library service in mind. As Rice (1997: 81) argues: *“Exposure to the mass media has a significant impact on our view of the world.”*

A final section allowed respondents to express any further opinions about the public library service or reinforce those already made. This section proved to be the most important section of the interview schedule. Respondents often used it to reinforce an expectation or perception already expressed, or to express a particular concern, or to praise the library. Such responses provided a further insight into the expectations and perceptions they had already indicated during the course of the interview.

Data Collection

Stage Two: Staff focus groups

The second stage of data collection took the form of focus groups with staff in the participant authorities. These were arranged via contacts within each authority who had been made familiar with the research and its aims. The decision to involve staff in an investigation of user perceptions and expectations was made for two reasons. Firstly, to explore further the mismatch in future expectations that was expressed in the *ASLIB* research between professional staff and the other groups. Secondly to consider staff in terms of the practical implications of the research project. As one author illustrates:

“An inaccurate understanding of what customers expect and what really matters to them leads to service performance that falls short of customer expectations. The necessary first step in improving quality of service is for management or empowered employees to acquire accurate information about customers’ expectations.”
Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 40)

Unlike the user interviews, staff taking part in the focus groups had not necessarily participated in the 1994 research. Some of the staff interviewed had been involved in the 1994/5 *ASLIB* work. However, some basic information about the research and its aims was provided to each authority before groups were conducted. This provided an opportunity for group members to be familiarised with the research and the role that they were being asked to play in it. Two focus groups were conducted in each authority. Each group was made up of between four and eight, professional and / or paraprofessional staff. It had originally been envisaged that focus groups would be conducted solely with professional staff in order to reflect the original *ASLIB* mismatch of opinion between them and the other stakeholding groups. However, at the request of Authority A, paraprofessional staff were also interviewed and this change to the planned fieldwork was embraced as an opportunity to further investigate any differing attitudes between the two levels of staff.

As with user telephone interviews each group, with its permission, was tape recorded for transcription at a later date. This also allowed the moderator to concentrate on what was being said and to take appropriate accompanying notes. Similarly, observations could be made regarding group dynamics and body language. In a preliminary statement made to each group the role of the moderator was defined as asking questions and keeping the discussion focused, it was made clear that the moderator would not participate in the discussion.

The project was highly dependent on the co-operation of the authorities participating and the staff and time they were able and willing to involve in the research. Therefore, it was essential that the research plan remained flexible so as to accommodate the needs of the authorities taking part. As a result the composition of focus groups differed between authorities. In Authorities A and C groups were made up of both professional and paraprofessional staff. It had been hoped, following the request to include paraprofessional staff, to conduct groups separating the two levels of staff. This was to avoid any possible bias (as suggested by *Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990 and Topor, 1996*) as the result of a line-manager or middle manager being present in the group. However, other sources suggest that:

“Unusual mixes and matches can sometimes break an issue wide open.”
On-line source: <http://www.mnav.com/bensurf.htm> (visited 12/12/96)

In the event any concerns that existed about groups with both levels of staff present were soon dispelled on conducting them. In both authorities mixed groups were conducted as a result of which staff were available to participate in the research at the time. In Authority B, groups were conducted as separate professional and paraprofessional groups. The researcher observed no *major* differences between the types of group conducted and the data yielded. The staff who participated in the research demonstrated a willingness to engage in frank and open discussion about the issues presented to them.

Why focus groups?

As already outlined the research was qualitatively focused. Therefore, for the same reasons as with users, the use of a survey or postal questionnaire with staff was considered inappropriate. Focus groups were chosen as the appropriate methodology for this research for a number of reasons, not least because of the logistical factors that were an inevitable consideration. Using focus groups meant that the researcher only had to impose on authorities for a day, or at maximum two, rather than over a longer period as would have been necessary had individual face-to-face interviews been conducted. Similarly using a group methodology meant that the research could be scheduled for when a group of staff had already planned to meet.

Perhaps of greatest advantage was the element of discussion that was created in the focus group situation. As opposed to a one-to-one face-to-face interview there is an element of synergy promoted by a focus group situation. In other words a “snowball” effect is created that allows group members to feed off each others ideas, and ultimately concepts that might not have arisen in a one-to-one interview situation might be covered. As the following quotes illustrate:

“The assumption underlying the technique is that the energy generated by the group process results in greater diversity and depth of responses. This means that the combined group effort produces more (and richer) information than the sum of individual responses.”
Wilcox Johnson (1996: 176)

Similarly *Maykut and Morehouse (1994:105)* suggest:

“Information that may not be thought of or shared in the individual interview may emerge in the group process.”

The decision not to use individual interviews with staff, and thus eliminate the potential for group bias, was based largely on logistical practicalities. Despite the fact that individual interviews would have suited the research, the potential problems for the authorities in organising for individuals to be away from their posts for an hour at a time had to be considered. Similarly the time taken to conduct and transcribe 12 individual interviews in each authority had to be considered in terms of the research timetable. Focus groups however, as with the choice of one-to-one interviews with users, allowed consistency of methodology to be maintained as they were used with staff by the *ASLIB* research. In addition, they offered the advantages of an individual interview, as *Stewart and Shamadansi (1990: 12)* illustrate:

“Participants can qualify their responses or identify important contingencies associated with their answers.”

Focus Groups were also considered particularly appropriate in terms of the research question as they promoted discussion of the perception and expectation relationship. These concepts are not easily quantified or defined.

Furthermore, as the fieldwork was conducted in its entirety authority by authority, focus groups followed the conduct and analysis of those data generated by the telephone interviews with frequent users. Therefore the focus groups were also used to promote discussion about any particular themes and issues that had been identified in the user interviews that related specifically to the library service being provided by that particular authority. For example, these included the opening of a new central library or points raised specifically by mobile service users.

Moderator role

The experience of conducting the focus groups differed vastly from group to group, and as such required various levels of moderator involvement. The role that the moderator of the focus group has to play in its success should not be underestimated, as *Topor (1996)* suggests: “*The key to successful focus group research is the moderator.*” It was found that in some of the groups the moderator hardly needed to say anything other than the framework of questions established in the guide, yet in other groups the level of moderator involvement had to be greater. This was particularly the case where groups sought confirmation that their discussion was appropriate, needing a greater use of probes to draw information from participants. In all cases it was found that after an initial “warm-up” period of between 10 and 20 minutes groups relaxed into their discussion. By this point rapport had been established between group and moderator and any suspicions that might have been harboured towards the moderator and the research’s intentions dissipated to give way to frank discussions. In some cases greater moderator involvement was necessary where groups had a tendency to digress from the research question. In such circumstances the moderator used a suitable question or probe to re-focus the discussion.

It is also the moderator’s role in a focus group to ensure that every group member is encouraged to contribute to discussions and to prevent a group being dominated by any one individual. During the fieldwork to the research only one situation arose where a group member could not be coaxed into participating in discussions. Generally, in terms of dominant group members, groups were self-regulating, with other group members not allowing the group to be taken over. The fact that group members were colleagues that knew one another and worked together encouraged this self-regulatory element to occur. It is also testament to the trust and respect that is felt between different levels of staff in Authority A and C where mixed groups were conducted, that staff felt able to contribute equally and debate the issues presented despite the presence of more senior colleagues.

Focus group guide

The research instrument used, the focus group guide, was exactly that, a guide. To be successful it had to be flexible and adaptable to the needs of each individual group with which it was used. As the literature suggests:

“The guide will outline topics and specific issues that you want the focus group to react to and provide information about. It should be comprehensive, but at the same time, it is a guide and nothing more.”
On-line source: <http://www.mnav.com/bensurf.htm> (visited 12/12/96)

The original focus group guide design was tested with a group of professional staff in the pilot authority. It was not tested with a group of paraprofessional staff, as at the time of piloting the intent was still to conduct the groups solely with professional staff. When the decision to include paraprofessionals was forced, there was not enough time to pilot the research instrument in this way. However, due to the professionalism displayed by all groups involved in the research, the lack of a paraprofessional pilot is not considered to have caused any undue problems to the research fieldwork, or the quality of the data collected. Whilst the pilot group proved successful in terms of the data collected it was found that the group covered areas in greater depth than had been anticipated. Some questions became unnecessary as their subject matter had already been covered by discussions of another issue. As a result of the pilot it was decided to redesign the guide to make it far more flexible and adaptable, reducing the number of items from twelve to four, employing those that were edited as probes should they be required.

The guide that was finally used with groups in the main study authorities (a full version of which is provided in Appendix A) consisted of the following four questions, used to stimulate and focus the discussions.

To start the discussion groups were asked; *“What do you think peoples’ perceptions of the service are?”* This question eased groups into the discussion. It was easy for them to understand and answer. In fact it was observed that once the conversation was started group members had a lot to say about the way they felt the service is perceived. In terms of the data yielded this question was employed to determine how accurate staff perceptions of user perceptions are,

thus further exploring the mismatch found by *ASLIB*. The GAPS model (*Zeithaml and Bitner 1996*) highlights the implications of this to service management. As with all questions on the guide various probes were available for use if the discussion dried up or needed refocusing. These covered the problems of the service being perceived as a council and public sector service and also considered the possible impact of customer care policies.

It was found that the discussion of perceptions focused the groups naturally onto expectations. As the conversation moved in this direction the question; "*What do you think the people who are coming through your doors and using your service, are expecting from it?*" was asked. However, the order of the second and third question on the guide did remain flexible depending on the shape that the perception discussion had taken in each individual group. Again this question was used in an attempt to further examine the mismatch found in the *ASLIB* research and in particular to explore implications in terms of service management and the provision of a quality service. Probes linked to this question considered the impact of changes in service industries and the increasing customer focus of society in general.

The third question on the guide asked groups to consider the impact of library image on perceptions and expectations of the service. This question was employed to explore staff opinions on outside mediating factors related to the social psychology of perception formation. These included media portrayal of the service, the power of reputation and the problem of stereotypes. Finally, in an attempt to bring together everything that had emerged during the course of the group, each group was asked; "*Can we manage user expectations and perceptions?*" This question was used to examine staff opinions about the role of promotion and marketing of the service and to address the issues facing the service raised during the discussion in terms of management implications and for the future of the service. As with the rest of the guide this question remained flexible and wording was altered slightly where necessary to remind the group of what had emerged during their discussions.

Transcription and Analysis

Some level of discussion about the mundane but crucial task of transcription is essential to a chapter examining the research methodology. It is an integral part of the research process, which is of paramount importance to the final quality of the data available for analysis. The transcription process formed a large part of this study, with (including pilot work), 47 user telephone interviews and 7 focus groups being transcribed. Recording quality was a particular problem in terms of the telephone interviews where a speaker-telephone was used to record the conversation. However, use of the notes taken at the time of interview meant this problem could usually be overcome. Similarly recording quality created problems when transcribing focus groups, where background noise, such as sirens or car alarms could not be controlled, or where a group member had a particularly quiet voice. Again the additional notes taken during the groups aided full transcription in most instances where the tape alone was unreliable.

A crucial element of the transcription process is deciding what, if anything should be omitted from the transcript. In the case of user telephone interviews everything was transcribed, including pauses, laughter or other verbal exclamations. Noting pauses, awkward silences, laughter or groans gave a further insight into the user's perspective, as the literature suggests;

*"The depth interviewer must note not only what is being said but also what is being omitted."
Oppenheim (1992: 67)*

In the case of the focus groups most of the conversation was transcribed with the exception of deviations, which were clearly not relevant to the research question. In these instances a note was made of the nature of the deviation made in the conversation. As with the telephone interviews, all laughter, pauses groans and alike were transcribed and any observational notes made at the time of the group pertaining to participant behaviour were integrated into the transcript.

The analysis of the data and the tools employed is highly personal, as favoured methods will differ from researcher to researcher. The data yielded by this

research were often personal to the respondent and as such the researcher acted as an interpreter, conveying what the respondent said about their thoughts and the opinions that they expressed to a wider audience. There are software tools available for the analysis of qualitative data, NUDIST being one such example. Use of these tools is again a decision personal to the individual researcher. This research has not employed the use of a qualitative data analysis software package. However, in terms of quantitative analysis of the Likert scaled responses to the user telephone interviews, the more basic functions of the statistical analysis package SPSS have been employed, to allow easy comparison of percentages for and between responses (particularly for the Likert scaled items). In using this package the limitations of the sample size as already outlined, have been duly considered.

Analysis of those qualitative data generated by both stages of the fieldwork has taken the same form and as such the discussion here refers to the analysis of both the user telephone interviews and staff focus groups. As already discussed, the research project chose a qualitative methodology to enable the formation of grounded theory. The analysis of data has followed the constant comparative method of data analysis as set out by *Glaser and Strauss (1967)*. Not only does this method facilitate the formulation of grounded theory it is also the preferred method of the researcher, a factor that needs consideration when dealing with large amounts of data as is the case with this study. The constant comparative method involves the coding of data into categories or themes as these emerge or as data emerge to fit them. Use of this method also allows comparison to the literature and previous research in the area, thus placing the research in context within its field. It also identifies particularly useful quotes directly from the data that may be used to support the theory or theories presented.

The design of the research instruments, particularly the user telephone interview schedule, reflected themes that the literature suggested may affect the formation and interaction of perceptions and expectations. Thus the final coding of the data was made with these themes (the role and impact of information technology; being a public service; the customer imperative and library role and function) in mind. However, as *Glaser and Strauss (1967: 113)* suggest:

“Using the constant comparative method makes probable the achievement of a complex theory that corresponds closely to the data, since the constant comparisons force the analyst to consider much diversity in the data.”

As such, whilst the expected themes did emerge from the data the constant comparative analysis identified many more and also allowed the grouping and consideration of emergent issues associated with the main themes. Cross analysis was also made between the user telephone interview data and those from the focus groups, examining themes from both perspectives.

As with all qualitative analysis methods, the researcher using a constant comparative methodology has to be aware of the volume of data that is available to them. By continually refining the comparisons made reduction can be achieved:

“By reduction we mean that the analyst may discover underlying uniformities in the original set of categories and can then formulate the theory with a smaller set of higher level concepts.” Glaser and Strauss (1967: 110)

In other words by linking themes and issues together the volume of data can be reduced into more manageable sized concepts for consideration. The themes and issues identified will be discussed in detail in the chapters to follow. However, the process can be illustrated by describing how the major theme of experience was identified by the constant comparative analysis. Linked into the experience theme were the impact of personal experience; influences on personal experience; image; stereotypes; reputation and library promotion, similarly each of these sub-themes contained issues that had been identified in the data. By considering the uniformity in all of these themes and issues they could be reduced into the one concept, experience.

Following the reduction of the themes and issues emerging from the fieldwork data the research has identified four key concepts from which to formulate its grounded theory. These concepts will form the basis of the thematic discussion

chapters to follow and are experience; the library's role in a changing society; confused perceptions and library staff as perception creators and expectation managers.

Research Experience

As this chapter has emphasised choosing the right methodological approach and research instrument as a vehicle for that approach is vital to the success of the study. Overall and with the advantage of hindsight, it is felt that the methods employed were the most appropriate for this research project. Particularly successful was the use of telephone interviews with users that allowed the quick collection of rich qualitative data from respondents widely dispersed across the country. Initial preferences were for an in person interview with users so as to mirror exactly the *ASLIB* research. However following the success of the telephone interviews the researcher would agree with the research already quoted (*de Leeuw and Van der Zauwen, 1988:296-7*) that there is little to choose between the two approaches. In fact if anything it is felt that the use of a telephone interview may have influenced respondent participation, eliminating as it does, the need to invite a stranger into the home.

The fact that this research was following up work that had been conducted four years previously was a point of concern. It is felt that response rates to the telephone interviews may have been negatively affected by the fact that there was a significant gap between studies. Unfortunately response rates are unpredictable and there is little that can be done to improve them and the researcher is disappointed that the target response was not achieved in Authority C. The research may have benefited from a third mailed response request, but the research timetable would not have accommodated this. Similarly it would have been possible to widen the sample in each authority to include occasional users to try and increase response rates, but then the consistency between users would have been lost making comparisons difficult. However, despite the time elapsed between studies the research did not find any significant problems in terms of recall. Respondents remembered the 1994/5 research and when reminded of the view they expressed to that research, were generally clear about

their reasons for expressing that opinion.

The researcher also had some concerns about the use of focus groups. The appropriateness of focus groups to the research, in particular the consistency that it would maintain with the *ASLIB* study was evident. However, the emphasis placed by the literature (*Topor, 1996 and Stewart and Shamadansi, 1990*) on the importance of the moderator role, made the prospect of conducting focus groups, without experience, somewhat daunting. The pilot focus group allayed these fears and it is felt that the synergy of the group discussions has provided the research with a richer and more comprehensive set of data than individual interviews would have.

The fact that the focus groups in two authorities were conducted with mixed levels of staff, would with hindsight, be something that the researcher would change. Whilst all the groups proved successful and yielded some excellent data, it is felt that had the groups been conducted separately with either professional or paraprofessional staff greater opportunity would have been presented to explore the mismatch of opinion between these two groups also identified by the *ASLIB* research. Also the researcher feels that the focus groups would have benefited from the presence of a separate note-taker. Although the role of moderator and note-taker was successfully combined, it is felt that more comprehensive notes and observations could have been made had the roles been conducted separately.

Although the research started from the basis of further exploring the mismatch of opinion identified by the *ASLIB (1995)* research, the data yielded from the research fieldwork progressed the study away from this original starting point. The focus of the research evolved through the data to concentrate on the formation of user expectations and perceptions and the relationship between user expectations and perceptions and its implications for the public library service. As such direct comparisons between the data collected by the research and the existing *ASLIB* data were not made, in favour of greater exploration of the new data.

Summary

In designing the research, careful consideration was given to the feasibility and appropriateness of various research methodologies, with the options of a postal questionnaire to use with library users and an individual interview to use with staff considered alongside the telephone interview and focus group eventually chosen. All frequent users participating in the 1994/5 *ASLIB* research were approached in each of the study authorities to take part in this research. The telephone interview schedule was designed to reflect issues impacting on perception and expectation formation and interaction identified in a wide range of literature. It consisted of four sections combining open-ended and Likert scaled questions and sought information from respondents on their library habit, how it was formed and influences on it. The information obtained complemented the data from the *ASLIB* research, which was available for appropriate cross analysis. Respondents were also asked to express their perceptions of and expectations from the service in relation to a number of issues including opening hours, information technology and future directions for the service.

Library staff involvement in the research was essential in order to further explore the original *ASLIB* mismatch under investigation and to consider the implications of user perceptions and expectations in terms of service management. Focus groups comprising professional and paraprofessional staff members were conducted, two groups in each authority. Groups were asked to consider their perceptions of user perceptions and expectations, library image and the possibility of managing users' perceptions and expectations to the advantage of the service.

In both stages of the fieldwork no major problems were encountered and it is felt that the chosen methodologies yielded some revealing, rich and fresh data, not explored by previous research (for example, *ASLIB, 1995 and Comedia 1993*). The analysis of these data will be discussed, as outlined, in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 – “Experiencing the Service”

Introduction

Perceptions are based on knowledge and experience. Past life experience, past service experience, knowledge and experience of other services can all impact on the perceptions that are created of a given service. These perceptions in turn influence the expectations that are held of that service. The importance of experience to the way perceptions are created is emphasised by *Hastorf et al (1970: 9)* who observe that:

“Past experience, language and present motivational state or goals for the future influence our perceptions of the present.”

Similarly, *Slovic et al. (1980: 184)* state:

“If one’s experiences are biased, one’s perceptions are likely to be inaccurate.”

The impact of experience on the perceptions formed of the library service became evident through the interviews with users and staff. This chapter will discuss “experiencing the service” by considering experience at four levels. Firstly the impact of personal experience will be examined through considering how, during a single service experience, a “snapshot” of that service will be formed. That experience will form the basis of the individual’s perception that expectations will ultimately be based upon. The chapter will go on to consider the highly personal nature of experience. This relates to internal influences, such as parental influence and external influences, such as the impact of government policies or media representation, and the role such influences might play in the perception expectation relationship.

The focus will then move to the library service to examine experience in terms of library stereotypes, image and reputation. Stereotypes of the library service have been a particular concern of the profession for many years and the chapter will discuss the evidence about stereotypes emerging from the research with users and illustrate the way in which stereotypes are perceived by staff. Furthermore, the impact of stereotypes on library image will be discussed alongside the power of organisational reputation in terms of perception creation. Finally, the emphasis will be placed on the library's role in creating experience through promotion. The means of achieving positive perceptions and realistic expectations will be considered, as will staff fears and concerns about service promotion.

The Impact of Personal Experience

The impact of personal experience requires consideration of the idea of experience as a "snapshot". An individual service experience provides a "snapshot" of any given service and that "snapshot" will depend on the part of the service being used, what it is being used for, the member of staff providing the service and so on. *Augoustinos and Walker (1995: 280)* refer to Gibson's ecological theory of perception:

"Whilst conventional theories argue that perception is the product of the internal and mental elaboration of sensory experience, Gibson argues that perception is a direct apprehension of the information contained within the environment at a particular point in time."

If repeated use of the service is made then the user will build a picture of the service through each individual "snapshot" of their experience. However, this may not be a complete picture as that user may use only one part of a multifaceted service. For example in library terms, a user may repeatedly use the fiction lending service of a branch library and so through multiple experiences have created a realistic picture or perception of that part of the service. However, that same user may never have used the reference section of the same library and so their picture of the service is by no means complete. This is a complicated concept and as such it is best illustrated through the use of examples. The

following dialogue is taken from *Barry Hines' (1969) novel A Kestrel for a Knave*. It illustrates one character's first experience of the library service and will be used to discuss the creation of the "snapshot" of experience.

" 'Are you a member?'

'What do you mean a member?'

'A member of the library.'

Billy pressed a finger into the inkpad on the desk and inspected the purple graining on the tip.

'I don't know owt about that I just want to lend a book on falconry, that's all.'

You can't borrow books unless you're a member.'

'I only want one.'

'Have you filled one of these forms in?'

She licked a forefinger and flicked a blue form up on her thumb. Billy shook his head.

'Well you're not a member then. Do you live in the Borough?'

'What do you mean?'

'The Borough, the City.'

'No I live out on Valley Estate.'

'Well that's in the Borough isn't it?'

A man approached and plonked two books on the counter. The girl attended to him immediately. Open stamp. Open stamp. She slotted the cards into his tickets and filed them in a tray. The man pulled his books to the edge of the counter, caught them as they overbalanced, then shouldered his way through the swinging doors.

'Can I get a book now then?'

'You'll have to take one of these forms home first for your Father to sign.'

She handed Billy a form across the counter. He took it and looked down at the dotted lines and blank boxes.

'My Dad's away.'

'You'll have to wait until he comes home then.'

'I don't mean away like that. I mean he's left home.'

'O, I see . . . well in that case, your Mother'll have to sign it.'

'She's at work'

'She can sign it when she comes home, can't she?'

'I know but she'll not be home 'til tea time, and it's Sunday tomorrow.'

'There's no rush, is there?'

'I don't want to wait that long. I want a book today.'

'You'll just have to wait, won't you?'

Look, just let me go an' see 'f you've got one, an' if you have I'll sit down at one o' them tables an' read it.'

'You can't, you're not a member.'

'Nobody'll know.'

'It's against the rules.'

'Go on. I'll bring you this paper back on Monday then.'

'NO! Now go on home and get that form signed.'

She turned round and entered a little glass office."

Following this service experience it is less likely that Billy will return to the library, in fact in the book he goes to a bookshop after this encounter and steals the book on falconry that he wants. It is also unlikely that Billy will use the library again in later life as his perception, based on this one “snapshot”, will be negative of an inflexible service unwilling and unable to help him. However, had the library assistant in this scene let him read a book at the table despite it being ‘against the rules’ Billy would have formed an entirely different perception of the library service, of a friendly, approachable and flexible service.

It would be hoped that had Hines been writing about Billy’s experience in 1999, the attitude displayed by library staff would be changed significantly creating a totally different service experience. Yet it should be noted that the service still largely requires a parental signature on a form that may act as a barrier to service use for some children, arguably those, like Billy, who need the service most. Whilst the research found staff to have a far more flexible attitude than that described by Hines in the novel, evidence that a certain level of negativity from staff towards younger service users still persists was also forthcoming. In Authority C one respondent told the researcher how, in her experience, her children had received different levels of service when they had visited the library alone than when they visited with her, she stated:

“I do feel it is wrong if you send a 12 or 14 year old along, that they don’t get the same sort of level of assistance as when their Mother is with them.”

If Billy had been served by a different member of staff who had let him read his book in the library his whole perception may have been different and he may have gone on to form a library habit. It is as simple as that. Two people may use the same service point on the same day for the same thing but because they are served by a different member of staff leave the service experience with a completely different perception of the service and as such a completely different attitude towards it. Similarly, as *Gaster (1995:48)* states, different expectations would be created:

“A previous bad experience can lead to an expectation or a fear that similar treatment will be meted out next time. So the service user can approach the next service episode more grudgingly, more fearfully and with lower expectations.”

The research fieldwork found similar evidence of this. In one example a respondent detailed how the librarian at the village library she used as a child put many of her friends off using the library:

“We had an absolutely super library with an old dragon looking after it! . . . We were always a little bit frightened of her. And I’m sure it was a little off putting. It never put me off but I’m sure it was probably off putting for some people.”

Respondent Comment (Authority C)

In contrast another respondent detailed how the local librarian was responsible for nurturing her library habit:

“Well Pam. If we hadn’t had someone like Pam I don’t think there’d have been as many children going. She was always so enthusiastic and helpful and the library was Pam.”

Respondent Comment (Authority C)

It is something that library staff also expressed an awareness of. In this example staff discuss how users receive different levels of I.T. provision, in relation to Internet access, from different staff members.

“ ‘But there is another member of staff who I know does not like using I.T. at all . . . I’ll let them and a couple of other members of staff will let them but somebody else may not.’

‘So if you’re not on duty, the person may come in on a Wednesday and you’re not there and the other two aren’t there and he won’t get the service is that what we’re saying?’

From Focus Group discussion (Authority B)

Evidence from the research fieldwork also suggests that staff are concerned about the fact that even frequent users form perceptions that are only informed by the part of the service that they use. As already outlined a user’s “snapshot” may only encompass a fragment of the whole picture. In other words the perceptions they hold are complete for one piece of a jigsaw puzzle not the whole

picture that the puzzle makes. As one focus group member observed, perceptions of the service will depend on:

“ . . . Which part of the service they are coming in to use, you know if it's local studies, if it's the ref., if it's lending, they'll approach each of those with different perceptions and it depends on their age and their own individual needs.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

Discussion in another group revealed a similar observation:

“I think possibly too the users slot themselves into certain categories. In that there are readers who come in just for their romance novels and there are other users who come in just to use the local history section for some in-depth research and wouldn't dream of taking a book out to read.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

It would appear that the problem for the library service is how to create a realistic perception of the library service from all the jigsaw pieces available to it. The literature discussing heuristics and biases highlights the problem of the perceptual process at a cognitive level. *Tversky and Kahneman (1982: 1124)* state:

“People rely on a limited number of heuristic principles which reduce the complex tasks of assessing possibilities and predicting values to simpler judgmental operations. In general these heuristics are quite useful, but sometimes they lead to severe and systematic errors.”

In other words, we use the knowledge that we already have available to us to process what we perceive, hence explaining why our experience and learning is so important to perception formation. Our past experience is used to help us create our present perceptions. Therefore somebody like Billy who had a negative experience of the library service as a child, would remember that experience and so if asked as an adult how they perceive the library service would draw on that available information to consider their current perception. As *Prins et al. (1995: 18)* state: *“Negative images seem to lead a long and obstinate life.”* However, Billy may never have revisited a library and as such will not have an accurate perception of the library service now. Thus his

perception is biased by the past experience upon which it relies and is subsequently inaccurate Schneider (1995) states:

“ . . . Our tendency is to judge present people or events on the biases of how well they fit known examples from the past. Normally this is a perfectly useful strategy – after all, we do want to benefit from past experience – but sometimes we use bad examples.”

This observation was also made during one of the focus groups:

“Perhaps people have had a bad experience of libraries in the past. I mean 10-15 years ago when libraries were quiet, if they'd gone in as a child or teenager and not found what they wanted, or been told off, or thrown out, it would be quite daunting to go back again and why go back if it's the same as then. It's quite difficult for them to imagine that we've changed.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Furthermore, the literature suggests that such inaccurate perceptions are problematic as:

“A great deal of research indicates that once formed, people's beliefs change very slowly, and are extraordinarily persistent in the face of contrary evidence.”

Slovic et al. (1980: 189)

When all of this is considered it is perhaps not surprising that there has been a move toward quality orientation in the library focused literature, with the literature specific to library management embracing in recent years the concept of examining user expectation and perception to aid in service management. Examples include *Cundari and Stutz, 1995; Domas White and Abels, 1995; Edwards and Browne, 1995; Hébert, 1994; Millson-Martula et al., 1995* and *Nitecki, 1996*. These authors have all explored the perception and expectation relationship of users/customers in their particular service domain. Many of them draw on the SERVQUAL model as presented by *Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988* as a base for their discussion. It becomes evident that perceptions and expectations have important implications for service management. *Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 105)* for example consider the “snapshot” of experience in the following way:

“From the customer’s point of view the most vivid impression of service occurs in the service encounter, or the “moment of truth”, when the customer interacts with the service firm.”

This gives the concept of a “snapshot” of experience a customer orientation. Rather than the moment of perception formation the service experience becomes the moment of truth when the service user evaluates the service experience, an evaluation that will decide whether future service use will occur. This is particularly important to the library service where the moment of truth may decide whether a library habit is formed or not.

However, this still presents the library service or any service for that matter with an essential dilemma. One user may perceive the service as good or improving for the exact same reason that another user perceives the service as bad or declining. A direct example from the research of the “snapshot” perception problem was found in Authority A. Here several respondents who had expressed a “will deteriorate” future expectation in 1994 had identified the fact that Authority A had closed some smaller satellite branch libraries in favour of opening a new central library with many more facilities. These users regarded this as a negative development as their local and conveniently located library had closed. Their experience had been bad and they subsequently had negative perceptions and future expectations for the service. However, in direct contrast one user in this authority cited the new library as the direct reason for expressing a “will improve” future expectation in 1994 as the following quote illustrates.

“Well because although there was always the threat as it were, or the possibility of some libraries closing down, the advantages of having one central one, with many other services seemed to outweigh those difficulties.”

Respondent comment (Authority A)

In addition, an individual’s knowledge and experience of other services will undoubtedly impact on the perceptions that they have of the library service and the subsequent expectations held in terms of service level and performance.

Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 90) observe that:

“The customer’s previous exposure to service that is relevant to the focal service is another force in shaping predictions and desires.”

Some of the frequent users interviewed for this research did make use of other services. In particular university library services were cited as a point of comparison. In Authority A staff felt that they were expected to fill the gaps left by university services:

“I think that students particularly who come in with reading lists have a misconception of what public libraries are. I think they think we are an extension of their college library.”

“Yes I think that they think that any book on their reading list should be here.”

However, realistically this is not surprising as the university / college services are tailored to meet the needs of the students and the specific courses that are being studied. The role of the public library may be perceived by students as being to fill the gaps left by their university service but realistically it is not nor should it be the public library’s function to do so.

In Authority B focus group discussions indicated concerns of more direct comparisons between the two types of service:

“We find that a lot with students generally, that they come to the reference library and they expect us to have banks of computers, Internet access, which we just don’t have at all.”

Yet, of the 40 frequent users interviewed across the three main study authorities only 12.5 per cent were also using University libraries with a further 10 per cent also using school or college libraries. Interestingly the most frequent source of other use was other local authorities, 15 per cent of respondents used another local authority’s library service. Usually this took the form of a user using a neighbouring authority as well. However, in a couple of isolated cases users also had tickets for services in other parts of the country where they had relatives or regularly holiday. The impact of this knowledge and experience of various other

service providers influenced perceptions in a variety of ways. For example one user perceived that if her university library were struggling to buy new books the public library service certainly would be:

“The new books that came for this year and we only had five new books, so if that’s the university I don’t think they’re going to be doing it anywhere else.”

Respondent Comment (Authority B)

Where other local authority services were being used the comparisons made were, in the minds of these users at least, like with like. In some cases users perceived their needs were better met by a neighbouring authority for whatever reason:

“I use X services a lot, when I say a lot I actually use them in preference to Authority A now.”

Respondent Comment (Authority A)

In some cases users’ perceptions of the library service were fragmented and as such their solution was to use different authorities services to meet the different needs that they had from the different component parts of the library service being used. Hence to realise a range of expectations and perceptions held by one user, service use was spread across more than one public library authority. One respondent in Authority C detailed the three different libraries that she used depending on what she required. She used her local branch for recreational reading and a bigger central library in her own authority for reference, and a neighbouring authorities central library as well for a further selection of reference and recreation materials. This is something that staff in all of the authorities also observed, although evidence was presented in the focus groups with the emphasis on neighbouring authorities’ users using their services rather than their users using their neighbours’ services.

It is also interesting to note that the research found evidence, both from staff and users, concerning differing perceptions being held for different service points within authorities. In other words users perceived their local library as being the

library to use for recreation but for information, perceived the central library as appropriate. One user in stated:

“It’s living in a rural area we only have a small library and we have to travel to the bigger ones for information.”
Respondent Comment (Authority C)

Another user in the same Authority also indicated:

“If there’s something special that we do need like for the boys’ coursework then we would go into the central library.”
Respondent Comment (Authority C)

Staff in Authority B also observed this difference in perception and subsequent use of branch and central services:

“I had a Mother and child come in a couple of weeks ago, and they wanted something for homework and I couldn’t actually find them as much as they wanted, I found them a little. And she said look don’t worry I’ll take you to the proper library tomorrow. And the child says where is the proper library Mummy? Well it’s in town, the Central library.”

Thus users are experiencing the service from within one authority in a different way, and subsequently are using different aspects of it to meet their needs at any one time. In this respect it could be suggested that some library users are behaving more like customers manipulating the relevant parts of the service to best meet their needs and this customer attitude will be explored further in chapter 4.

However, it is not just experience of the library service in its many forms that affect user perceptions. The service can be and is perceived in a wider context both as a council provided service and as a public sector service. Thus an individual’s experience and knowledge of the local authority and of the public sector in general can impact on the perceptions that they form of the library service. As one focus group participant observed:

“I think people seem to have a negative perception of services provided by the local authority . . . because the local authority is short of money, or the local authority is badly managed, or the local authority is in crisis.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

The research found evidence to suggest that of user respondents who had expressed a “will deteriorate” future expectation for the service to the 1994 research, some attributed this to envisaged cuts in funding to the public sector.

In Authority A 100 per cent of the respondents who had answered “will deteriorate” in the 1994 research cited issues relating to cuts to funding, library closures and reductions in opening hours, as reasons why they felt uneasy about libraries’ future. Furthermore 77.8 per cent of these respondents still feel pessimistic about the public library service and its future, the following quote being representative of respondents feelings about this in Authority A:

“ . . . The general feeling seemed to be that local authorities were going to be squeezed and libraries were likely to be an area they cut funds in. They can’t really cut meals on wheels and they can’t cut some of the more life threatening, you know some of the services you really can’t manage without, like rubbish collection, they can’t really cut that, but they can cut libraries without anybody sort of dying or anything horrible happening.”

In Authority B, however, only 30.8 percent of respondents expressing a “will deteriorate” expectation to the 1994 research made reference to funding and finances. For example, one respondent said:

“Well, because of their finances, at least that’s what I assume. I mean funding of things like libraries tends to go down, well it’s one of the last things isn’t it? Things like museums and libraries are usually at the end of a long list of everything especially when there is very little money.”

In Authority C only 15.4 per cent of respondents expressed a “will deteriorate” future expectation to the 1994 research. However, of these, all attributed this expectation to fears about funding. Similarly, 50 per cent of respondents who thought the service would “stay the same” in 1994 related this expectation to funding, in other words they did not perceive the service as having the funding to

improve. Furthermore, one respondent in Authority C attributed her 1994 “Don’t know” response to the fear that the service would decline due to lack of money:

I think it was more hope than anything, hope that it wouldn't deteriorate. The hugely drastically cuts in expenditure which were obviously taking place and had to be made up in other things.”

Staff also acknowledged that in some instances they have experienced a sympathetic understanding of financial restraints from some users:

“I think they have a lot of sympathy because I think most people understand that public money's limited and obviously they're going to think it is better to spend it on hospitals and schools than libraries. Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

However, at the same time staff also feel that users are expecting more from the service as the result of an increasingly customer responsive culture. Yet they also perceived that users experience the service differently because it is a council run institution. One member of staff commented that:

“Because it's a public service they expect more from it. With schools they seem to accept they can't afford it, but when it's a public service; 'we pay our rates' and all this sort of thing, and they seem to expect more from it.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Evidence of a similar nature emerged from all the focus group discussions with staff providing examples of when a user had told them that: “my rates pay your wages”. However, staff also expressed the opinion that they felt that not all users were aware how the service is funded:

“It's very rare that you find anyone who knows how the library service is funded. Very rare.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C).

Interestingly the research found a greater level of understanding amongst users, across all authorities, towards the financial problems facing the public library service than staff intimated they had experienced during focus group discussions. Perhaps this illustrates further the mismatch that exists between user and staff

opinion found by *ASLIB* in 1994. It is also interesting to note that where, on the one hand, users perceive a financially struggling service, they also expect more I.T. due to the move towards I.T. in society in general. This reinforces the idea, already presented that the service is not viewed as a whole by users but in fragments. This will be explored further in chapters 4 and 5.

Observations were also made by staff that in some cases, being perceived as a council run institution may be a barrier to service use for some potential users. It was felt that, for some people, there may be a fear associated with a council run institution, this was felt particularly to be the case in service points that shared their space with other council departments. As one group member commented:

*"I think some people find it intimidating really."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)*

A direct example of where this has been the case was presented in Authority C:

"We had a lady join the other week and she shook as she filled her form in. I said 'are you alright?' And she said 'I've been plucking up courage to come in here. So I said 'but we're only the library.' And she said 'I know, but it's such a daunting place.'"

It is not just past experience, or experiences of other services that have been found to impact on perceptions. Life experience also plays a significant role. In other words the perception that we have of a given service will depend on the point that we are at in our life. For example it might be widely expected that a teenager would perceive the library service as being less relevant than when that teenager becomes an old aged pensioner. There are different demands impacting on time and different options are available at these two distinct stages in life. Previous research has found this to be the case. *Kirkup et al. (1989: 99)* observed that:

"Whether people use libraries is dependent on the particular circumstances they face at any time and people may drift in and out of library use during their lives."

Comedia (1993) and *ASLIB* (1995) also present similar observations. The present research encountered two users who had in 1994 described themselves to the *ASLIB* research as frequent users but who currently are not using the library service at all. This is what they had to say about their change in perception of the service in terms of their own personal needs.

I'm sure it is just a temporary part of my life where I haven't been for a while, but I've no doubt that I will again."
(Respondent comment. Authority A)

It's not essential in my life in any way at the moment."
(Respondent comment. Authority C)

Similarly in the pilot study a user described how her perception of the public library service had dramatically changed since 1994. In 1994 this particular respondent had expressed a "will deteriorate" future expectation for the service based on the fact that she felt it was old and outdated, used predominantly by older users and was somewhat stagnant, as such she could not envisage service improvement. However, since that interview she has had a child who she now takes to use the children's services at the library. Her perception has completely changed in the light of this and her view was much more positive, the result of taking her "snapshot" of the library from a different angle.

Influences on Personal Experience

Personal experience impacts on perception creation. Similarly there are factors that impact on personal experience that will further influence the way that an individual's perceptions of the library service are formed. The social psychology literature discusses these factors in terms of schemas. *Augoustinos and Walker* (1995: 32/33) define a schema as:

"A mental structure which contains general expectations and knowledge of the world. This may include general expectations about people, social roles, events and how to behave in certain situations."

They continue:

“Schemas help guide what we attend to, what we perceive, what we remember and what we infer.”

The way our schemas are created and how we act upon them will depend upon those influencing factors that impact on the way we experience and hence perceive the world around us. These factors can be considered as either internal or external.

Internal Factors

Internal factors affecting our perception formation might include family; schooling and area lived in. For example, something as simple as whether as a child the local library was located five minutes walk away in the village lived in or a half an hour bus ride away, may well affect an individual's perceptions now of the service.

Behaviour is learned. *Reich and Adcock (1976: 47)* state that:

“Specific behaviour and attitude patterns are often attained through imitation”

As such one of the most powerful internal influences on perceptions has to be family. This is something that the consumer behaviour literature focuses on.

Rice (1997: 111) argues:

“We have developed our attitudes as a result of prior experience. Many attitudes can be traced back to our childhood experiences, and so we accept that family is a major shaper of attitudes which may last a life time.”

Engel et al. (1990: 170) also observe that;

“The influence of the family on consumer decisions is pervasive.”

In terms of this research it has been interesting to note that with very few exceptions, the majority of frequent users interviewed had formed the library

habit as children, largely under the influence of a family member. Respondents recounted vivid memories of visiting the service with a parent or sibling. Just one example of many is provided from each authority, below:

“As a family we all read so I was encouraged anyway.”

Respondent Comment (Authority C)

“When I was about, well I joined as soon as I could read, so I’d be about 4 or 5. I joined the children’s library and I’ve been going ever since . . . Initially I went with my parents.”

Respondent Comment (Authority B)

“When I was little, my Mum and Dad used to take us to the library when we were little ‘cos they’ve sort of used it all their lives and we just, it’s part of the everyday thing.”

Respondent Comment (Authority A)

Staff considering how to attract younger users to the service also noted the importance of family influence in successfully developing a library habit:

“It depends on their background and family background and whether there’s a tradition of visiting libraries as a family. If the whole family use the library, if their parents use the library then they are more likely to be familiar with it.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

Where family influence had not stimulated the library habit, school influence had with respondents attributing first memories of the service to a class visit to the library or the mobile library visiting school:

“My first memory would be as a five year old and the library coming to school and picking the books from the school library.”

Respondent Comment (Authority C)

The research found only three examples of library habit being developed in later life. One respondent started to use the library when she married because her husband did and another started to use the mobile service following a move to a rural area, never having used a static library previously. Also one gentleman told how he had developed his library habit following the death of his wife. His sister had suggested they research their family tree and from his use of the local studies

and archives services he progressed to borrowing fiction. In each of these instances an internal factor, the influence of another person, or of life circumstances (in these examples a house move and the death of a partner) have instigated library use.

However it is developed, evidence both from user interviews and the literature suggests a library habit, once formed is strong. As McKenna (1987: 120) argues:

“Previous learning creates a tendency to pay attention to familiar patterns.”

Even where library use may lapse in favour of other services, once a library habit is formed it is likely that the user will eventually return. For example one user observed:

“I’ve used the library on and off all my life. I suppose I didn’t use it when I was at university, I used the university library and when I was at school I used the school library.”
Respondent Comment (Authority A)

In an article in *Reading Teacher*, Jago (1995: 625) writes passionately about the public library service and details the development of her own library habit:

“All through my teenage years I would head for the library on weekend nights when I didn’t have, or didn’t particularly want, a date. There I found a clean, well-lighted place to cruise for adventure without threat to my virginity.”

She continues:

*“I acquired my library habit early. At age 10 I insisted my parents detour past the school library on their way to the hospital for baby number 5. I had finished my book and refused to stay with the sitter without another. I remember the title I checked out, *The Life of Leif Ericson*.”*

Jago’s account introduces the idea of memory in maintaining the library habit once formed. The researcher observed that nearly all respondents gave strong and emotive accounts of their first library memory. The following quotes are the most descriptive first memories found in each authority:

“When I was 10 I was making a crystal set and my Father said he would give me a 2 shillings and sixpence, cat's whisker and all the rest you made from cardboard and bits of wire you found and so on and somebody gave me a headset for listening. So all I needed was to know how to do it and it was mentioned in a children's book of radio in X library.”

Respondent Comment (Authority A)

“I remember going inside on my own and asking if I could join. And they said yes and gave me a card to take home, and I've never looked back since. That was the very first memory.”

Respondent Comment (Authority B)

“My memory is so basic it's probably not relevant to what you want, it's the little cards. The little brown cards where everything was filed and I think we were allowed four tickets and they were all filed in this little brown card.”

Respondent Comment (Authority C)

Perhaps it can be argued that these vivid recollections of first encounters with an institution that comes to feature prominently in the respondent's life, will influence the way that they perceive the service today. As *Muddiman and Black (1993)* observe:

“In an age of nostalgia where anxiety over a “lost” culture of the past and a “diseased” culture of the present is marked, libraries can fulfil a distinctive heritage role, a role underpinned by the rich legacy of library buildings.”

The fieldwork evidence suggests that first memories of the service reinforce the traditional perception of the library as a book-based service. Despite the fact that the service does now provide much more than the traditional book based service this research found that it is still perceived very much in a traditional light. When presented with the statement *“I identify public libraries with a service providing books for loan and reference”*, 90 per cent of frequent user respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Although the sample is too small to be of any statistical significance, it does illustrate that there is, amongst these users across three different authorities at least, a traditional perception of the library service. When this is considered, it becomes evident that a traditional perception may act as some form of perceptual anchor

for users. This is not an entirely surprising observation at a time of rapid change in terms of technology and the services the public library service offers and in terms of the problems facing it as a public service. As the literature suggests:

“Many authorities are facing their most severe financial crisis in living memory.” Leach et al. (1994: 234).

External Factors

Unlike internal factors influencing experience, external factors are harder to identify and are wider ranging in their impact. They include outside agencies, government policy and the mass media. It became evident that staff felt government policy and announcements about the library service did have an impact on their users’ perceptions, but perhaps more importantly, their expectations of the service. Of particular concern were recent announcements about Internet provision to libraries. As one focus group participant observed:

“I’ve already had someone ring up and say ‘Mr Blair’s going to put computers in libraries, and when are they going to be there?’ Expecting to be able to come in and use one.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Staff also referred to Government initiatives such as *The Citizens’ Charter (1991)* in terms of users’ perceptions of themselves:

“Since the Citizens’ Charter and such people are very aware that this is my right. They’re very quick to complain and vocalise.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

It is interesting to note however, that whilst the general issues of funding and cuts to the public sector were given as reasons for the future expectation expressed to the 1994 research, only 12.5 per cent of respondents referred directly to national government. Furthermore all of these respondents were in Authority A. Comments included:

“I think it is undervalued by Government generally.”

The research also found direct evidence of the impact of an independent outside agency on user perceptions and expectations of the library service. In Authority B concern was raised about the impact of the BBC's "Computer's don't bite" initiative. Staff expressed concern that this had raised expectations to a level that could not be met. They felt that the initiative had created inaccurate perceptions of the library service. It was felt that the publicity put out by the BBC had led users to believe inaccurately that a member of staff would guide them through the initiative step by step. One group member complained:

"The publicity, both times led the user to believe that we were going to sit there with them and give them training. So their perception was a false perception raised by an outside body."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Such an example illustrates the potential problems for the service in managing expectations and perceptions that are created by agencies beyond its own control.

Perhaps the biggest external influence on perceptions and expectations is the mass media. *Rice (1997:82)* illustrates the force with which the media can impact on perception and thus subsequent expectation formation.

"The media is now virtually all - pervasive, and few of us can escape images and inputs from television, radio, magazines and newspapers. Inevitably, these will give a particular vision of reality, and it seems unrealistic to suppose that people's perceptions will not be affected."

Similarly *Bromley (1993: 7)* suggests:

"The mass communication media make it possible for large numbers of people to know about a person (or product, or organisation) indirectly. The reputation of a person or thing can expand quickly, so that certain things are then said or believed by 'people in general.'"

This research has found direct examples of exactly what *Rice* describes. In Authority A this became known as the "Guardian factor" due to the fact that of the 64.3 per cent of respondents interviewed to express a "will deteriorate" future expectation to the *ASLIB* research, 77.8 per cent read the *Guardian* newspaper at least once a week or more. However, *McKenna (1987: 249)* presents research

that suggests that the impact of the mass media may be an over stated case. The research by *Katz and Lazarsfeld* quoted by *McKenna* found that messages conveyed by newspaper, television and radio initially produced insignificant attitude changes. Significant changes in attitude were found some weeks after the initial exposure which the researchers attributed to the fact that in the intervening weeks the message had been discussed with people whose opinion was valued.

McKenna (1987:119) also suggests that:

“Perception is selectively affected by personal motives as we pay most attention to stimuli that appeal to fairly intense motives. Thus our perception may be distorted by our motivations.”

In other words, as with politics, those respondents reading the Guardian newspaper in Authority A probably do so because it reinforces beliefs and values that they already hold.

Yet evidence from the focus groups conducted with staff suggests that they are concerned about library image and the way in which it is portrayed by the mass media and this will be considered in detail in the next section of the chapter.

Stereotypes, Image and Reputation

In 1976 *Totterdell and Bird (1976:123)* observed that library images were:

“Frequently unfavourable, or at least rather negative.”

Continuing that this was:

“No news to librarians, though they may be surprised at their continuing tenacity.”

The media portrayal of the library profession has traditionally been laden with the familiar stereotypes: the twin-set and pearly, bespectacled middle aged

spinster is an image that focus group discussions suggest haunts library staff. In 1999 it is still possible to think of a negative library stereotype being used on television. Even the BBC in recent adverts for their annual report, on saying that it was available at public libraries, had Jill Dando raising her finger to her lips and uttering “Shush”!

The social psychology literature describes this type of stereotype as a social stereotype. *Augoustinos and Walker (1995:210)* define it here:

“The social or cultural representation of a group is a social stereotype. Social stereotypes are shared and more or less, universally identifiable by all members of a culture.”

The problem for the library service is that a social stereotype, being universally recognisable becomes hard to change and therefore has a greater chance of influencing perceptions. Similarly as the stereotype creates certain perceptions it will also perpetuate certain expectations. The research found evidence of this occurring even with frequent users of the service. Library staff were described as, “*a little bit straight laced*”, and it was felt that “*you’ve got to be quiet in libraries haven’t you*”. These responses came from the users who should have the most realistic perceptions of the service, as they use it the most.

The focus groups highlighted staff awareness of such stereotypes and the subsequent problems that they create. One group member commented:

“It’s just desperately difficult to derail a good stereotype!”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The image of the service and the perceptions that it creates to both frequent users and potential users alike is a matter of concern to library staff. The following comments are typical:

“It hasn’t got an a particularly brilliant image.”

“It needs an image I think!”

“The one that springs to mind straight away is the thing about noise in libraries, you know, you’re supposed to be quiet in libraries, and I have to say I do still, when I’m wandering around the libraries, hear people saying ‘shush’ and it’s not the staff.”

“Typically they think of the lady with the glasses, the bun, the pearls and the books!”

(Selected comments from staff focus groups in Authorities A, B and C)

In one of the groups the affect of stereotypes on user perceptions led to a discussion about whether fulfilling a more traditional role in the form of a quiet study space was conforming to stereotypes or meeting expectations. Some group members felt that library users were entitled to expect a certain element of the more traditional environment. However, other group members argued that:

“For 10-15 years libraries haven’t been like that. It’s intriguing to me how long the perceptions, of you know the dusty area full of dull things, and you know? We’re a bunch of bumbling old fools! With spectacles and a bun! All that sort of job, and there still is that hanging around in public libraries, they’re surprised at what we’ve got!”

(Comment from Focus Group. Authority A)

However, it is possible that stereotypes of the service are not always negative. Although they create a certain outmoded image, they are also familiar. *Augoustinos and Walker (1995:245)* describe stereotypes as “a kind of cognitive anchor for expectations”. As such stereotypes could work in favour of the service because they are comfortable and familiar. *Hinton (1993:66)* refers to the seminal work of *Walter Lippman*. *Lippmann* is credited with popularising the term stereotype in his book *Public Opinion*. He argued that:

“The real environment is too complex for us to understand it fully directly and therefore we perceive the world more simply. Stereotypes are part of those simplifying the world in order to be able to deal with it.”

However, despite the social psychology literature’s suggestion that a stereotype does not necessarily have to lead to a negative perception, focus group evidence indicated overall concern about a stereotyped image that may form a perceptual barrier to use of a service, leaving it perceived as outdated and irrelevant. All the

focus groups conducted made some reference to the fact that they had experienced some level of surprise at what the service had to offer:

*“They’re often surprised that we do anything more than just books.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)*

Interviews with users provided further evidence of this. 52.5 per cent of respondents felt that people would not be aware of the other services that a public library offers such as the loan of audio materials, unless they were library users. Similarly some of these users intimated that they themselves, as library users had only become aware of these other services recently. Evidently there is an issue here about service promotion, which will be considered in due course.

It can be argued that in terms of image, being perceived as a traditional book based service may be problematic for the service. Amongst many young people reading is not considered fashionable. Even with the recent reading renaissance thanks to “Harry Potter” and alike, books are not considered particularly “cool” and the research found an abundant supply of quotes from both service users and staff about the reluctance of young people, especially teenagers, to use the service. An example of it was also found from an unlikely source. In an interview with American television star *Oprah Winfrey (1999)* the general image of books was highlighted by the following quote:

“The producer of my TV show said, ‘you’re always talking about people following their passion, and your passion is books, so go out there and talk about it. I said ‘Oh, my God, and die in the ratings? Everybody knows you can’t talk about books on TV!’”

Although this example refers to a US context it can be regarded as universal. In Authority C one group of staff discussed this problem of the image of books and reading directly in terms of television coverage. Staff expressed concern about the programmes supposedly promoting books and reading on British television. As one group member observed about one such programme:

“That is so boring! If you watched that for half-hour it would put you off reading for life I would think. It always has to be high brow doesn't it? Anything to do with books on television, it always has to be academic. If I didn't work in a library and I was watching that programme, I'd never go in and get a book.”

This perceptual link between the public library service and books and the potential image problems it might create highlights further the problems facing the service in terms of its role. Whilst books are not particularly fashionable I.T. is and this creates a dilemma for the service in terms of how it is perceived. The research found evidence to suggest that the same user could perceive the library in different ways. In other words its image is fragmented due to the diversity of services it offers. Examples of this have already been detailed in terms of users expressing sympathy towards a lack of funding yet expecting up to date I.T. services. Similar evidence was found in terms of users perceiving the library as a community-based service encouraging children but where it was also perceived as a place of quiet and study. On the whole the research found that a consolidated library image was not easily found among users interviewed rather that the service was viewed in a fragmented way.

Image is of great concern to any organisation because of the impressions that it creates. *Asch (1946)* conducted a seminal study about the way we form impressions. During this study subjects were presented with a trait list, consisting of seven personality traits: Intelligent; skilful; industrious; warm; determined; practical and cautious. Each group was given the same list with the exception of one word; for the second group warm was replaced with cold. The groups were asked to form an impression of the person with these characteristics. The affect on the impressions formed of the individual by changing this one word was found to be dramatic, illustrating that impressions are easily formed and influenced.

Once an impression is formed this creates an image. This reinforces the problem facing the service in terms of the “snapshot” of experience that a user bases their impression of the service on. If the experience is negative the impression created is likely to be negative too. A simple example of this was found in the focus

groups where staff presented evidence of people who will not join the public library service because their impression is that the books are not clean. As one group member commented:

“I have a friend who’s a lecturer at a local college. Very, intellectual lady, two degrees and is working on her third. Her husband’s a grammar school teacher and her children are on their way to university, if not to be Prime Minister! And she won’t use the library because the books aren’t quite clean.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The importance of impression formation is that it ultimately affects reputation and reputation is one of the strongest tools available to any organisation in terms of promotion. “Word-of-mouth” is the biggest communicator of reputation however the literature highlights the problem this creates:

“More than a third of all word-of-mouth information is negative in nature.”

Engel et al. (1990: 162)

The power of word-of-mouth communication about library reputation within the community it serves was observed by all of the focus groups. One group participant commented:

“I think word gets around pretty quickly actually if something’s not quite right or if something’s going very well.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

The problem that occurs for the service is where the impression formed is negative, as this will negatively affect the reputation that it has with a user. If that user then talks about their impressions to other users or potential users then the reputation of the service may be damaged. One member of staff observed:

“They say in all the research that it takes ten good visits to extinguish the memory of one bad one.”

Comment from Focus Group Authority C

Schneider (1995) quoting Skwronski and Carlston confirms this observation:

“Perceivers weight some information more than others because of perceived diagnosticity; negative information generally receives higher weight than positive.”

Similarly Bitner (1990:72), taking the customer perspective, suggests that:

“Customers may be influenced by the perceived experiences of other customers.”

Data from the research indicated that the reputation of the library amongst its frequent users is, as would be expected, good. According to staff, children’s membership is an area where this is particularly evident. The focus group discussions yielded evidence to suggest that parents will take out library membership for their children because they think that it is *“the right thing to do”* yet they do not join the library themselves.

However, the literature suggests that impressions and reputation can be managed. Bromley (1993: 6) argues that:

“Reputations can be ‘managed’, and to some extent detached from the entities to which they refer.”

Promotion

The Gaps model of service quality (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996) presents service providers with four provider gaps that if they are closed will close the key customer gap: the difference between customer perceptions and expectations. Therefore, a realistic expectation, if created, can be met during the service experience. This will in turn create a positive perception of the service. In terms of the public library service as with other public sector organisations this might require that expectations of the service be raised. Writing about public services Gaster (1995: 1) observes:

“Low quality services generating and perpetuating low expectations, have too often been the experience of users and producers of those services.”

In public library terms *Totterdell and Bird (1976: 133)* also observed that:

“Public libraries operate on a minimum level of user satisfaction, surviving largely on the good will, low expectations and relatively easy demands of the majority of users”.

If expectations are such that they cannot be met by the service, as is increasingly the case in terms of I.T. provision, then it is necessary to manage them in order to ensure that perceptions remain favourable. This might mean referral to another organisation, or communicating the reason why it is not possible to provide a certain service directly to users. *Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 50)* suggest:

“Customers’ service perceptions may be enhanced if the company educates them to be better users of the service.”

This was a strategy that focus group members suggested the service should be more active in employing. One observed:

“By talking to them and explaining what you are doing and why you are doing it . . . yes we can manage expectations.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

Another stated:

“I think we’ve got to re-educate users to a certain extent . . . we’ve got to be clearer about what we are trying to do.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

All of the participant authorities had some form of formal communication with their users through some form of customer feedback procedure. Evidently a primary role in the management of expectations and perceptions falls to staff. The role that staff have to play in the formation of a “snapshot” of the service has already been considered in this chapter. It is something that staff interviewed also emphasised, one observed:

“Often the first thing people walking through the library door see is the person standing at the counter. You know, and if they can’t relate to that person then the image is obviously wrong.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

The present research has provided a wealth of evidence from users about the role of staff in the perception of the library, so much so that it will be explored in detail in chapter 6, which is devoted to considering staff role.

Promoting the service in order to ensure that the service experience occurs in the first place to enable perceptions to be created or changed is also a major concern for public library staff. As *Kreig-Sigman (1995: 418)* observes:

“In an era of ever diminishing resources, effective promotion and communication of public library services has become vital to the survival of those same services.”

Promoting the service is something that staff are passionate about. It is certainly something that those participating in this research felt is not being done well enough and that needs improving. Comments included, from Authority A: *“It’s the fact that we don’t prioritise it right.”* In Authority B: *“You’re told that we should promote the service but there’s no extra money to promote, and you need to spend money, you have to.”* And in Authority C, when asked about promoting the service one group observed: *“We can always do better can’t we?”*

However, it became evident that staff felt that there was a lack of training in service promotion and that what was being done was not as effective as it could be. In fact the pilot focus group took this problem back to basics pointing out the lack of training at library school level in this respect. The group commented:

“Your not trained for that are you? When you go to library school there’s never anything about that.”

‘I think they should teach you something about dealing with the media.’

‘Yes very much so because it’s so easy, especially as a young inexperienced professional, to put your foot in it! Whereas with a little bit of tuition you can create an impression that is much better.’”

From Focus Group discussion (Pilot Authority)

It also became clear that users felt the service ought to promote itself better, one user interviewed summed opinion up very well by describing the library as “*a well kept secret*”. Many user respondents expressed surprise that the library service does not advertise more. In some cases the research found evidence that users were attempting to promote the service themselves among friends and family. One respondent proudly stated:

“I always say to people ‘Oh try the library, it’s amazing what they do know’ but I just don’t think there’s enough advertising about it.”
Respondent Comment (Authority B)

However, despite this evidence of good will the service needs to rely on something a little more concrete. In all the focus groups staff enthusiastically expressed ideas for how the service could better promote itself. Circulating literature to other council service points such as leisure centres and schools, community outreach, promotional stands in shopping malls and a continuing commitment to basic customer care being the most repeated examples of the many presented.

It became clear that staff had some very clear ideas about promoting the service and about the problems that successful promotion might create. Examples included the problem of coping with new users when the service is already stretched in terms of what it can provide:

“The other thing that’s always worried me, and I don’t know whether it needs to worry me or not, but I think perhaps if you accept that book lending is still going to be part of our, whatever we do, and then you add in the I.T. and everything else, I just wonder if, with the current staffing levels we’ve got, whether we’re going to be able to cope.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Furthermore staff were concerned about how best to promote the service as one group member observed:

“The problem is you can’t just send out a flyer that says ‘Hi we’re the library service – we do everything!’”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The literature also warns of the danger of over promotion:

“If communications set up unrealistic expectations for customers, the actual encounter will disappoint the customer.”
Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 47)

Staff also felt that:

“There’s no point advertising or marketing anything that isn’t excellent. You just end up shooting yourself in the foot.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The fieldwork made it clear that users and staff consider promotion of the service important. Promotion illustrates just one area where the practical advantages of understanding user perceptions and expectations become clear. As this chapter has illustrated, experience of the service is fundamental to perception, and thus subsequently to expectation formation. In ensuring effective service promotion, the public library can aim to manage perceptions created by past experiences by creating new and better ones. This is particularly the case where a user who has not previously formed a library habit uses the service at a point of need.

The research found that service promotion is a universal point of concern for staff, but the methods chosen to do this are dependent on the budget and policy of the individual authority. In addition all the focus groups mentioned a desire for some form of national advertising campaign to promote libraries beyond the odd placement in a soap opera during national libraries week. Staff look to professional bodies such as the Library Association to be the guiding light. At a local level, however, the evidence presented during the focus groups suggests that authorities lack a consolidated strategy when it comes to promotion, which leaves staff feeling frustrated. The following quote typifies a mood that was identified across all the participant authorities to a greater or lesser extent:

“We don’t advertise anywhere do we? Our own mobiles don’t even know they’re mobile libraries do they, it only says in little letters.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

This is a problem that the library literature also identifies:

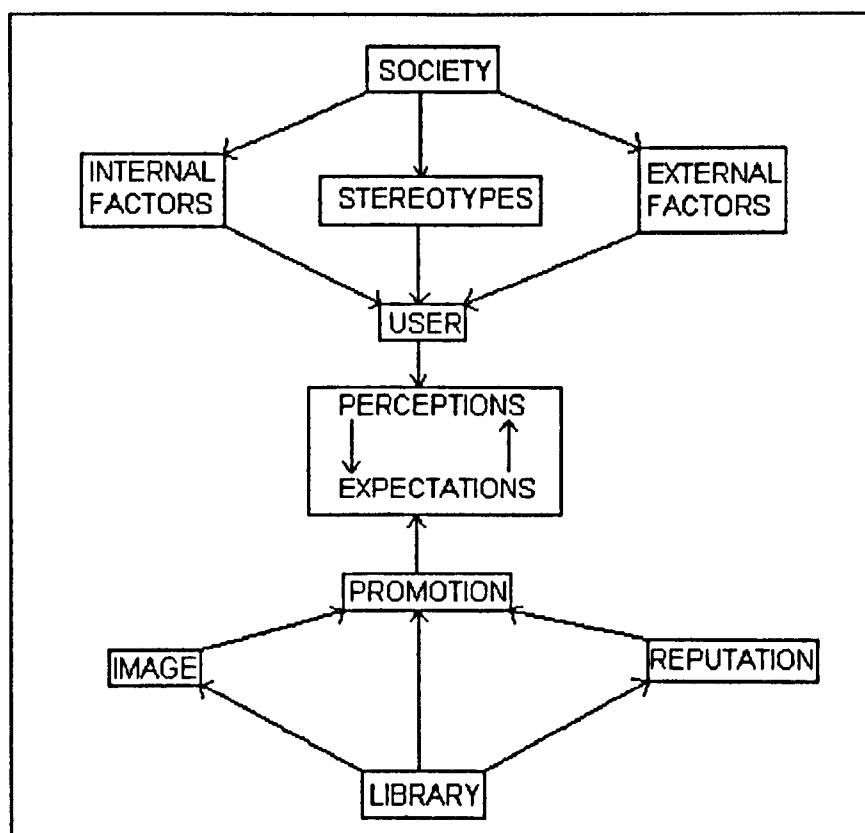
“Promotion is like kissing a member of the opposite sex in the dark. You know what’s going on, the person you’re kissing knows what’s going on, but no one else does unless you turn on a light.”
Kreig-Sigman (1995: 418)

With the need for promotion comes a need for funds, which in today’s public sector are thin on the ground. However, there are management tools available to the service in terms of customer care and quality management which can be harnessed to aid the management of expectation and perception creation and as such promotion of the service. These tools will be considered in greater detail by chapters 4 and 5, but it should also be noted that if funds can be invested into promotion, promotion itself is a way of generating income and securing further funds by raising the profile of the service.

Summary

The following diagram has been designed to illustrate the issues discussed by this chapter and the way in which they interrelate.

Figure 2 – Relationship between issues discussed in Chapter 3



The research has found that experience is fundamental to the formation of user perceptions. As the diagram illustrates at the user level (the top segment of the diagram) society creates experience via social norms and stereotypes and the internal and external factors, that all impact on the individual user and subsequent perceptions and expectations that they have of the library service. The perception that is held will affect the expectations that the individual has of the service. At the centre of the diagram a constant flow between expectations and perceptions is represented. This relationship is dynamic, changing at the user's level at certain points in life, as more experience of the service and other services is gained and when different internal and external factors impact on that individual user's experience. At the library level, the relationship remains dynamic as new policies are adopted, different services are offered and the

library's image and reputation changes as the service evolves. The relationship also remains dynamic at a very basic level. With each new service experience the user builds up their "snapshot" of the library service as a new piece to the puzzle is added, or the "snapshot" is taken from a different angle. This is why image and reputation are so important to the library segment of the diagram as they serve to confirm or refute the individuals perceptions and expectations and as such may affect whether the service is revisited or not. Thus promotion becomes the library's key to manage its reputation and image and in doing so the expectations and perceptions that are created and held of it.

Chapter 4 – “Library Role: Responding to a Changing Society”

Introduction

Chapter 3 has discussed in detail the library experience and factors that impact upon and influence it. As such the society in which the library exists is an external influence impacting on the perceptions and expectations that are formed of it. The society of the 1990s is a society preparing for a new millennium and one which is constantly evolving and changing, and it is unrealistic to suppose that a changing society will not impact on library services. The society that libraries serve has become increasingly dynamic. The result is that society as a whole wants and expects different and diverse services, has different information needs and as such the library service is faced with managing increasingly dynamic perceptions of itself. *Domas White and Abels (1995: 36)* comment on what reacting to these changes mean for library services:

“Not only are libraries competing for customers within this changing information delivery marketplace, they are re-examining their management, their manner of justifying budget, and their very existence.”

The present research identified two forces of societal change in the 90s that had a particular impact upon the expectations and perceptions of the public library service held by users and staff: the rise in use and application of information technology and the customer focus of a consumer society. This chapter will discuss these forces of change.

Firstly information technology will be discussed in terms of its increased application in libraries and its role in defining library role now and for the future. The debates that arose about pursuing I.T as a valid service for the public library service will also be presented and the expectations of staff and users in relation to the levels of I.T they perceive as appropriate for the service to be providing will also be considered, as will the tensions that this debate about the role of I.T in the

service creates, both in terms of the direction that it might take and the speed at which expectations are formed. These tensions were evident between staff and users, between user groups and between staff. The research identified changing expectations of the service in respect of the availability of information technology. This chapter will also consider the implications that an increasing emphasis on I.T services and I.T for service delivery has for service quality, by examining it in terms of the SERVQUAL dimensions, because as *Zeithaml (1988: 18)* suggests:

“Consumers’ perceptions of quality change over time as a result of added information, increased competition and changing expectations.”

The emphasis on service quality has also been identified by the research as being symptomatic of another change in society, an increasing emphasis on the consumer. *Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 81)* have noted that:

“Managers of service companies bemoan what they perceive as an unprecedented escalation of customer expectations in many service industries.”

The research found that changes of this nature in other service industries and other parts of the public sector have had a significant impact on the way in which the public library is perceived and what is expected from it. Public library users are used to being customers in so many other service situations that an impact on their behaviour as public library users might be supposed to be inevitable. The chapter will discuss evidence of changing expectations, changing perceptions of users and the challenge for the library service in responding to the consumer society.

The Impact of Information Technology: Revolution or Evolution?

Defining Library Role

The volume of copy devoted to the great I.T. debate in the professional library press over recent years illustrates the potential enormity of the medium. As the library service faces the next millennium, it does so with the increased capabilities of information and communication technologies at its disposal. Along with these capabilities come threats to the service in the form of an increased number of agencies offering the information and entertainment power of I.T in direct competition to those services which the public library service provides. As *Holt (1996: 553)* observes:

“Infotainment corporations want public library users to replace walking or driving to a nearby library branch for inexpensive at-home and in-office access to information and entertainment.”

Kinnell Evans (1997(a):5) also comments:

“New ICT developments mean opportunities as well as threats, to the traditional role of the library as the information provider of first resort.”

Similarly these technologies provide a challenge for the public library service, in terms of using and exploiting them to the service's advantage. This has implications for issues of funding, staff training and defining the boundaries for an appropriate library role.

Whether or not I.T has a relevant role for the service is a somewhat out-dated debate, as there appears to be a universal acceptance that I.T is a necessary departure for public libraries in order for them to fulfil their role as community information provider. *Muddiman and Black (1993)* observed that the library:

“was regarded as a key information point and archive of local identity.”

Given the information potential of I.T in aiding the fulfilment of this role, the debate has shifted over recent years. Whether or not librarians should be “surfing the Net”, networking their CD-ROMs or increasing their hardware capabilities is no longer the issue, however, the extent to which, and nature of, the technologies employed by the public library service is. A respondent observed:

“I don’t think it’s as much a question of whether the library should be providing its materials in book form or in computer form or any other form, but what sort of materials it should be providing.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

The research found that much of the discussions of staff and user participants centred on I.T, particularly in terms of its role in and for the future of the service. Yet some would argue that the great technological revolution has not actually become apparent to many public library branches across the country:

“Despite all the hype and excitement about the Information Revolution/Age/Society, the chances are that your local public library will not have changed much over the years. New carpet, new shelving, friendlier staff, even an OPAC maybe, but anyone waking from 30 years suspended animation would probably find the place much as it was in ’68.” Batt (1999: 12)

However, the research found that whether seeing it in their own library branch or not, users accept that information technology has a prominent role to play in the future of the public library service. 82.5 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: *“information technology is a challenge that the library world needs to face if it wants to be relevant to the next generation.”* When asked why they agreed with the statement comments typically included:

“It’s no longer true to say that books are the only medium of information”
Respondent Comment (Authority A)

And:

*Well information technology is something that everybody has got to use.”
Respondent Comment (Authority B)*

It became apparent that the users interviewed on the whole do expect to see I.T. in libraries and regard it as a valid service for their public library service to be providing. Even where individual users do not particularly like I.T it is regarded as a “necessary evil”. The following quote is illustrative of feelings expressed by such users:

*“Well as much as I dislike information technology, I think yes, everything does need to hinge on that.”
Respondent Comment (Authority B)*

During the focus group discussions staff revealed a real concern regarding the level of I.T expectations, indicating that, although many users are still “traditional” in the book orientated sense, in some instances, expectations of the level of I.T provision available were unrealistic. The research found that this was a particular concern to Authority A where staff believed that a new Central library had raised I.T expectations.

*“They saw that money had been spent on a wonderful new building that had lots of I.T kit in it and they have begun to expect an awful lot more.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)*

Staff in Authority A also indicated that they felt this situation was exacerbated by the fact that the new library had created new users who had no previous library experience to draw on when creating their perceptions of the service. As such, expectations were felt to be particularly high, particularly where I.T was concerned. The impact of I.T on expectations in this way has also been observed by the literature:

*“While these [technology] and other advances successfully have increased customer satisfaction, they have likewise raised customer expectations.”
Millson-Martula and Menon (1995: 33)*

Evidently, the age-old dilemma facing the service in terms of funding the demand for any service, be it an increased popular fiction collection or the latest

CD-ROM resource is presented by this. *Kinnell and MacDougall (1992: 23)*
comment:

“There is an inherent tension between the duty to deliver a comprehensive service which offers the maximum opportunity for people to choose the service relevant to their needs and the resourcing constraints placed on managers.”

It also became apparent that definitions of information technology differed vastly between different users, ranging from networked terminals, on-line and with printing facilities, to videos and CDs. Given this variety of definition it is not surprising that staff observed conflict occurring between different user groups on the I.T debate. This illustrates the complicated nature of managing user perceptions of the service, particularly when it comes to I.T. A respondent in one focus group observed the tensions that this can create:

“If you take a 1930s building and you put a big I.T space in it and you're attracting lots of 14 year olds, you cannot actually physically keep them separate from an older population that want to come in maybe for quiet study or whatever, all under the same roof, so old buildings or new you do get that problem.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

Despite evidence of tensions and conflict between different user groups, it became evident from the data emerging from user interviews that there was a general consensus among users about the value of I.T in ensuring the service continues to attract new younger users. It was widely recognised that I.T plays an increasingly large and important part in the education and entertainment of young people, and as such it is something the library needs to offer. Comments included:

“I think they'd get more youngsters into the library if the information's available on computer.”

Respondent Comment (Authority B)

And:

"I think they are going to HAVE to keep up with it because the next generation of children going through junior schools now, are automatically being educated in I.T."

Respondent Comment (Authority C)

The library literature also embraces the concept of using I.T as a magnet to attract younger users. Holt (1996:549) suggests some I.T services that the public library could offer:

"Online and printed materials on computers; computing and software; classes for parents so they can keep up with children's computing; providing reviews of popular children's software – these and dozens of other computer-related services can be developed as significant venues for public libraries."

Yet it became clear that staff viewed the role of I.T in the library service as being anything but simple. Of major concern in finding the right balance between books and I.T was that there was not an over-reliance on technology, that it did not become regarded as a panacea, a cure all, and the saviour of public libraries:

"The worrying thing about I.T is that people see it as the be all and end all of saving the library . . . There's no point just putting terminals in for the sake of it."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

This is a warning that is also made by the literature:

"For public libraries, technology is a tool, not a panacea."
Holt (1996:554)

Similarly Millson-Martula and Menon (1995: 33) observe that:

"Blindly embracing sophisticated technology does not necessarily translate into optimal or even enhanced service."

In terms of the way in which I.T is perceived, staff exhibited stereotyped perceptions about different user group expectations. Staffs' perceptions of older users' views of I.T conflicted with those of older users (those users over the age of 60) interviewed. The following comments were representative. One user

recognised the appeal of information technology:

“Oh computers have absolutely no appeal for me but I am sure that they are relevant, just because I don’t understand them. But I think obviously they are important, because so many young people are so clever with them.” Respondent Comment (Authority C)

Another commented:

“I should say computers should be available in the library, anything that keeps up-to-date with everything.” Respondent Comment (Authority C)

Another recognised the attraction to younger users:

“I don’t know much about that sort of thing but future generations want to know about it obviously.” Respondent Comment (Authority B)

And one respondent commented on the learning potential of I.T in the library:

“The possibility of using computers for study, which I believe some people do, that’s a vital service for many people.” Respondent Comment (Authority A)

Perhaps this acceptance of service diversity from older library users reflects a perception of reality. In other words, whilst older users may not like I.T. in libraries they accept it as necessary to ensure service survival, preferring to perceive a changing library service rather than no library service at all.

The research found that age played little role in the formation of perceptions of the public library service generally. Furthermore, when presented with the statement: *“public libraries should stick to what they know best books!”* 70 per cent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. A finding, which is consistent with previous research dating back to Kirkup *et al.* (1989: 97), who found that:

“Most users also felt strongly that there should be more things going on in a public library than just lending books.”

Focus group discussions revealed staff to have experienced very different opinions about information technology from their older users. The following discussion from one focus group expresses a fairly universal experience:

“They think that technology doesn’t belong in the library. This is the older generation, the younger ones just accept it because they see technology everywhere they go, but the older ones don’t like to see it there.”

The discussion continued:

“We’ve actually got people who’d still like to go back to the old Brown issue.”

To which another group member added:

“And if the computer goes down, it makes their day!”
From Focus Group Discussion (Authority C)

Whilst in almost complete opposition to the evidence gathered by the telephone interviews with users, this observation does raise another serious point about the role of technology in the library, that of reliability.

Issues of Service Quality

In terms of service quality, reliability forms one of the SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988) dimensions. Nitecki (1996: 182) defines this dimension as:

“Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.”

The point raised by this example is that although technology has come to be regarded as progress and therefore universally good for the service, if it does not function properly, or is not operated properly, then users’ perceptions of service quality will not be favourable. As St Clair (1997: 88) states:

“Reliability in customer service is the ability to provide what was promised, dependably and accurately. For this to happen in the new information environment, however, new hardware and software must work effectively, every time, whenever needed, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.”

In all of the participant authorities staff raised the issue of technological reliability. In two authorities the local authority touch screen service available in service points was cited as the greatest problem. It was felt that out of date and inaccurate information created a very poor perception of the service, in fact some staff reported that they had turned their terminals off because of this. Other examples included an OPAC system that was off line and therefore did not show a true catalogue. These service failures are of particular concern, as *Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 81)* illustrate:

“In general, customers are likely to be less tolerant about unreliable service than other service deficiencies, which means they have higher expectations for this factor.”

In terms of the future role of technology in libraries perhaps the Internet becomes the biggest concern in terms of reliability. *Astbury (1994: 130)* observes that:

“The accelerating trend towards the information society forces public libraries to revise their concepts. There will be a continuous need for professional librarians to provide the human interface between the individual and the technology.”

If librarians are acting as the interface between the user and the Internet, given the volume and nature of the information available on the World Wide Web, the reliability dimension becomes all the more important. It is very difficult to guarantee the reliability of much of the information on the Internet. This creates huge problems in terms of ensuring service quality and favourable perceptions. This presents the librarian with a conflict. If the Internet is not provided at all then perceptions of the service will be affected in the responsiveness dimension of the SERVQUAL model, while poor information from the Internet would jeopardise perceptions created in the reliability dimension. This was a problem that was noted by staff participating in the research:

“The danger with the Internet though is that the information isn’t always put there by the correct people. You can’t 100 per cent trust it.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

On further examination it becomes evident that the uses of information technology in the public library service also raise perceptual issues in other SERVQUAL dimensions. As well as the reliability and responsiveness dimensions, the use of I.T. in libraries impacts on the assurance and to some extent the empathy dimensions of this model for service quality.

The responsiveness dimension highlights a further dilemma that information technology creates for the public library service. The research found that of particular concern to staff was the fact that I.T expectations once created with users, were self perpetuating and that as such expectations could snowball quickly. Staff in all authorities observed that once one piece of I.T. equipment had been installed expectations about further I.T services soon progressed. For example from users wanting more CD-ROMS to then wanting more terminals to use the CDs on so that waiting times are reduced, or from users wanting Internet access to wanting personal e-mail accounts and so on. To ensure that favourable perceptions are maintained, the service is challenged with responding to these expectations. As one respondent noted;

*"Having opened a new library that's got not quite "state of the art I.T", but we've watched it now not being replaced and not keeping up to date. So the users who came in 3 years ago and found this spanking new facility with lots of high quality I.T, now just see the same kit."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)*

Across all three participant authorities evidence of high user expectations of I.T was a constant feature. Comments ranged from:

*"The publics' perception is that we don't have enough I.T. . . they expect a particular level of service that we can't always provide."
Comment from focus Group (Authority B)*

To:

*"I think with technology they do expect things quicker and faster, because the technology is there so why can't you key in directly to the British library?"
Comment from Focus Group Authority C*

Perhaps it is here, in considering information technology, that the mismatch between professional staff and user opinion noted by *ASLIB* is most evident. The evidence from the present research would suggest that this is where the gap between customer and service provider is at its greatest. Perhaps *Van Fleet and Durrance (1994: 6)* present a reason for this. They suggest that:

“Public Librarians recognise that their tools are inadequate. They appear frustrated that they cannot defend what they know to be a crucial and threatened public good: free public library services available to all citizens.”

It became clear during the focus group discussions that staff see the great potential of technology but are guarded in their enthusiasm by the harsh realities of funding. One group highlighted the extent to which this is felt:

“We pushed for a word processing package, CDs and the Internet and we finally got the Internet access oh, 2 or 3 months ago. But its all on one PC! So we've got word processing, we've got printing, we've got Encarta, we've got everything you need, but only one! . . . There's just no budget.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Where I.T is concerned user expectations appear to deviate from the norm. As already noted in chapter 3 the research found evidence to suggest that users are sympathetic towards the funding plight of the public library service. Yet at the same time where I.T expectations do exist, in contrast to the traditionally low expectations for public services (*Totterdell and Bird, 1976; Gaster, 1995*), they appear to be high. For example one respondent to this research commented:

“Well they ought to have PCs, which are connected to the Internet so that people can do what they want and also print things out, so with printers connected.”
Respondent Comment (Authority C)

And it is interesting to note that the Internet was the almost universally quoted example of technology that users want to see the public library service providing. In some cases users indicated that they would be prepared to pay for services like the Internet, raising the debate about exacerbating the widening gap between the

information rich and the information poor, the following comment being representative:

"If people can't afford the Internet at home then it would be nice to have one at the local library. To be paid for though – I do think it should be provided by the public library service but there should be some sort of subscription."

Respondent comment (Authority B)

Despite expressing sympathy to the funding problems of the public sector users would also like to see more I.T. This reinforces the suggestion made by chapter 3 that users now perceive the service as fragmented. The challenge for the service is how to ensure service provision to a level that will satisfy snowballing high I.T expectations from users and ensure a favourable perception of the service is created in the responsiveness dimension of the SERVQUAL model.

However, even if the I.T were readily available to satisfy the highest user expectations and ensure a favourable perception, if staff are not suitably trained in the use of the technology, perceptions will remain poor. In terms of service quality, this will impact upon the assurance and to some extent the empathy dimensions of the SERVQUAL model. *St Clair (1997: 88)* states:

"Staff must keep up to date with new technologies in order to provide quality service and to have confidence in the equipment."

The research fieldwork suggests that staff are afraid that a lack of training prevents them from providing a quality service where I.T is concerned.

Comments included:

"In many cases, the staff are only half a step ahead. We're not trained on the information technology."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Another respondent stated:

"The problem arises if you haven't had enough training on it, somebody goes in and goes to a member of staff that's not used to CD-ROM and they haven't got a clue."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

It was found that where staff did not feel they were well trained in information technology, they lacked confidence and this in turn had an impact on staff morale, as *Jordan and Jones (1995: 32)* indicate:

"In periods of rapid technological and structural change in libraries, staff are made to feel insecure if they see their jobs under 'threat' of change, but they feel a great deal more insecure if inadequate provision is made – too little, too late – to retrain them."

Where staff were not trained in the technologies it showed in the group discussions. Where the conversation touched on information technology, there was a hostile and discontented atmosphere. Where staff were trained and confident in the use of technology such as Internet access and CD-ROM and using them in a routine fashion, the I.T discussion became less of an issue. It is interesting to note that in all the focus groups, staff discussed I.T in two distinct segments. The I.T systems that are used for the day to day routine of the library were viewed separately from the additional I.T services on offer, despite the fact that principles of use behind both forms are essentially the same. Perhaps this reflected the different levels of training that staff had received on each application of information technology.

It became clear however, that in some instances it was felt that the use of I.T in running the library service had also led to some unrealistic expectations of the service. Being able to look up stock on the computer was something users had come to expect and as such staff felt users to be more demanding in this respect. Furthermore, the literature suggests that expectations in this respect are likely to increase. *Kinnell (1995:268)* states:

"The importance of I.T in the operating environment of library services is likely to increase as networked information becomes much more of a reality across all kinds of library and information services and as information users' expectations become more sophisticated."

Expectations appeared to be wide ranging and included, for example, staff being asked to use the computer system to tell a user what another library authority had available, and the title of a book borrowed previously with no description other than the cover colour. Staff also felt that users expect service to be quicker because of the technology perceived as being at their disposal, but that as one respondent observed, often:

"In that respect their expectations are a bit divorced from what we can offer!"

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

I.T, therefore, has clear implications for the perceptions that are created of the service and can affect perceptions of service quality across some of the SERVQUAL dimensions. Yet in terms of performance indicators and measure of I.T in public libraries it appears that this is new and somewhat uncharted territory. As Nitecki (1996: 181) observes:

"A measure of library quality based solely on collections has become obsolete."

The research found that this is an area causing staff concern. New services are being adopted and embraced, but there is a lack of suitable measures of service quality, effectiveness or performance indicators. It is not after all possible to measure I.T performance by relying on that public library stalwart, the issue figures. As one respondent stated:

"We're going to have to find some way of monitoring and recording usage so that we can say look at all these instances of I.T. usage at branch A, branch B, this percentage of use was such and such and this was for accessing CD-ROMs."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

The concern with performance indicators and service quality in I.T provision and all area of service delivery reflects the other major force for change in the 1990s, the shift towards the consumer society.

The Consumer Society: “The customer is always right even when he’s wrong!”

The 1990s have brought with them an acute awareness of the customer, of consumer interest and rights and of a society driven by a consumer imperative. In seemingly every institution, from universities to building societies, the management drive towards some form of customer standard or charter mark has become increasingly evident with the Investors in People standard flying proudly outside any organisation to which it has been awarded, as research by *Goulding et al. (1999)* highlights. With this has come a change in the traditional service industries. Supermarkets have opened later and later into the evenings going twenty-four hours in some locations to meet a seemingly unending consumer demand. Even that institution traditionally associated more closely with customer fear than customer care, the bank, has opened its doors on Saturdays; introduced telephone banking; and even banking over the Internet. All of which reflects a move in today’s society to accommodate the customer. As noted by chapter 3, documents such as the Citizens’ Charter also reinforce the public’s sense of themselves as customers with rights.

The literature also notes the impact of the Citizens’ Charter:

“Around 1990, it is arguable that the focus on the consumer began to take on a more serious character, signalled by John Major’s inauguration of the Citizens’ Charter in 1991. A concern with service ‘quality’ and guarantees of minimum service standards were underpinned by a new interest in management alternatives to neo-Taylorism.”
Muddiman and Black (1997: 96)

And *Cutler and Waine (1994: 141)* state:

“The Citizens’ Charter is an illustration of the extent to which consumerist rhetoric is pervasive in the public services.”

Holt (1996: 547), also observed the rise of the customer and the awareness of “consumer rights”, commenting:

“Individuals of all ages and from all walks of life expect to receive first-class customized service whether buying things or services, when those expectations are not met, customers do not return.”

Raised or lowered expectations?

It has become clear from the discussion presented previously about the impact of information technology, that user perceptions and expectations of the public library service are constantly changing and shifting to take account of changes happening elsewhere in society. The rise of consumerism in the 1990s is perhaps one of the most powerful forces of change and the research found that, as might be predicted, users and staff were aware of this force impacting on library experience.

The research found that one area where a consumer responsive society had impacted firmly upon expectations of the public library service was opening hours. As one member of staff observed, other service industries are impacting on the way that the public perceives the clock and calendar:

“It will be interesting to see what happens in X when Tesco’s wade in and distort the entire economy AND the clock and the calendar.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The research indicated that the issue of opening hours was one with which staff across all of the participant authorities were concerned, indicating that they were feeling the pressure to look at weekend opening, particularly Sunday opening and later evening hours to respond to the demand created by other services. It was felt that, as shops open Sundays and that a lot of town centres see many businesses opening Sundays, an expectation was evident that the library should be following suit. Comments included:

“There is a pressure to be open longer and weekends, because that’s what everybody else is doing and that’s what people do expect.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Another respondent observed:

“The way service industries are open all day, every day, shopping in any way shape or form, especially on the out of town sites, I mean it is first thing in the morning ‘til last thing at night, virtually seven days a week. So we do get comments like ‘are you going to open on Sunday?’ or ‘why are you closed Saturday afternoon? It’s the only time I can get in.’”
Comment from focus group (Authority B)

Another member of staff commented:

“The expectation that we should open in Sunday is definitely there, and a lot of shops are open on Sunday now, so that has changed.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, the user interviews revealed that to those frequent users participating in the research, Sunday opening was not an overwhelming issue, 45 per cent of respondents thought that it would be a good idea. Where respondents expressed indifference to the issue of Sunday opening it was almost universally with sympathy towards staff with comments such as the following being typical:

“Well everybody deserves a day off don’t they?”
Respondent Comment (Authority B)

And:

“No not Sundays or even Bank holidays for that matter, I mean they are entitled to a bit of time off aren’t they.”
Respondent Comment (Authority B)

Users also reflected the changes in society when asked about opening hours.

One user admitted:

“I don’t like Sunday opening for anything, but having said that I find it quite useful!”
Respondent comment (Authority C)

It was also interesting to note that the issue, particularly of Sunday opening divided users across the participant Authorities. The research found that users in the participating London Authority were more vocal about Sunday opening with

a greater percentage of respondents saying that they would like to see their library opening Sunday than across the other two Authorities combined. 71.4 per cent of respondents in this Authority expressed an expectation for the library to open on Sundays, forming 55.6 per cent of the overall total of respondents expressing that view. It is felt that this reflects the experience of those users regarding Sunday opening of other services. In other words, a London borough user's exposure to Sunday opening might be supposed to be greater and for a longer period of time, across a wider section of services, than in the metropolitan and the county authorities, particularly compared to the smaller rural communities of those authorities.

The research revealed that of much greater concern to users than Sunday opening, was the issue of the library opening later into the evening. A general pattern emerged of users experiencing libraries opening until 6:30 – 7:30 p.m. The frequent users expressed a desire to see libraries reflecting other services and opening later into the evening to accommodate people at work, students and special interest groups. 80 per cent of user respondents expressed an expectation that libraries should at least be considering opening later into the evening. Some users even detailed how the obstacles of funding might be overcome to achieve this. One respondent stated:

"Yes they should be considering opening later into the evening and closing in the daytime, given that this government nor any foreseeable government is going to give them any further money."
Respondent comment (Authority A)

Another user considered how later evening opening could be an income generation opportunity:

"I suppose they could go into the video market too. It doesn't just have to be educational does it? It would be a way of them earning income to keep all the other bits going and if they did do that they'd have to think about staying open later."
Respondent Comment (Authority B)

The need to examine expectations regarding opening hours was also noted by staff who were aware of the need to examine the issue sympathetically to reflect the needs of the communities being served. Comments included:

"Our shops close at lunch time, but there's an awful lot of people who would use the library in their lunch hour if we were open, but we're closed at the same time."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

And:

"I think it actually depends on the different communities, because a community where they are older, they won't come out in the evening."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Staff also noted the wider impact of changes in society on appropriate opening times for the library. One focus group discussed in detail how changes in working hours elsewhere reflected a need for libraries to be more responsive to user availability, fearing the consequences of declining use and the failure to create library habit for future generations because the library simply was not open at a time when members of the community could use it. This was of particular concern where large numbers of the community commuted out of a given area for work. As one respondent commented:

"People just aren't there when the library is open. If we are open 9 a.m. until 6 p.m. and people are leaving at 8 a.m. and not coming back until 7 p.m. we're talking maybe 10,000 people doing that, the library's not open and we've lost a huge potential market."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Flynn (1993: 153) notes, quite simply, of this problem:

"There are two solutions to the mismatch between the timing of demand and the availability of supply. Either the user can be persuaded to conform to the availability of supply or, the supply pattern can be altered."

The literature also reflects the need, identified by staff, to consider the community's needs:

*"Swiftly changing markets make it necessary to use more formal techniques for taking the community pulse."
Holt (1996: 566)*

Yet despite users voicing expectations regarding Sunday opening and evening opening and staff reporting a change in these expectations reflecting the changes evident elsewhere in the service sector, the research indicated a somewhat surprising finding when asking users specifically about opening hours. When presented with the statement: *"Public libraries are closed when I want to use them"*, given the other evidence gathered, a surprisingly low figure of just 32.5 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. However, of those remaining, 60 per cent did add a caveat along the lines that because they did not work they could personally easily access the library during opening hours. They anticipated that had they been working their response would have been different. Perhaps this low figure set against the other evidence presented also represents an inkling of the trend, noted by and of previous library research (for example *White, 1985* and *Proctor et al., 1998*), that library users are traditionally reluctant to criticise their library service for fear of losing it.

Another area in which staff expressed they had experienced rising user expectations was in answering enquiries. It was felt that users expected staff to go that bit further and were not happy unless they found the exact answer they were seeking, a problem, as sometimes users do not articulate queries successfully. One respondent observed:

*"I think users expect us to be able to formulate their query for them. They don't really know what they want. Probably the prime example is parents coming in to do homework on behalf of their children."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)*

The literature examines the potential perceptual problems that might be created in this sort of situation, if staff fail to successfully interpret users needs. *St Clair (1997: 90)* comments:

“If the information provided doesn’t match what the customer is seeking, the information transaction has been useless and a waste of time for all parties. Adding to the difficulty is the established and well-documented fact that most disappointed customers will make no further reference to the transaction, but will simply ‘file it away’ as another disappointment with the information service unit.”

Despite evidence to suggest that what is happening elsewhere in service industries is creating higher expectations in this respect of the public library service, the research also found that users also appear to respond to the external stimuli they receive about the state of the public sector generally. These appear to stimulate the formation of opposing low expectations of the service. This appears to be particularly the case with health and education, the library service being regarded as the poor relation, a problem noted by the literature, as *Kinnell Evans (1997: 2)* states:

“There are considerable competitive threats, even for those services which appear to be in a monopoly position, simply because resources are finite and library services are competing for funds with other equally worthy public services, especially, education and health.”

Examples of this have already been discussed during chapter 3 in relation to issues of funding, as have evidence from staff of user sympathy towards their ‘plight’ as a public sector organisation. These low expectations create poor perceptions of the service and sit in direct contradiction to the high expectations that the research observed about I.T and opening hours. This illustrates how despite creating high expectations at one end of a continuum, society can also create low expectations at the other end. The result of this is that users are left with mixed and confused perceptions of the library service, which often conflict directly with each other. It was observed that users would often contradict themselves in the response they gave to the Likert statements. One of the more prominent examples of this is presented below. In response to the statement: *“information technology is a challenge that the library world needs to face if it wants to be relevant to the next generation”*, one user gave a “strongly agree” response saying:

“The younger generation have been brought up in a world of I.T. and sadly books are becoming a thing of the past.”
Respondent Comment (Authority C)

Yet when presented with the statement: *“in the public library of the future books will be a thing of the past”* the same user strongly disagreed with the statement observing that:

“Books are part of British heritage and they will always be around.”

The implications of such confused and conflicting perceptions of the service will be considered in detail in chapter 5.

The research found evidence of low expectations where users had expressed surprise at the level of service received. One user stated:

“I didn’t think they’d have the answer, nor did they, but they were as near as they could.”
Respondent comment (Authority A)

Another commented:

“I wasn’t expecting them to come up with the book, but on the other hand they were quite happy to look, which I think is good.”
Respondent Comment (Authority A)

Thus despite evidence of high expectations the research found low expectations also exist among frequent users and that as these can be easily met or exceeded, the user can be easily satisfied even if the service is not one which a professional would rate highly, a danger that the literature also identifies:

“For 90 per cent of customers to say that high quality service was provided may look good at first sight but if they had very low expectations in the first place this is no cause for satisfaction.”
Skelcher (1992: 12)

Perhaps this provides further evidence that accounts for the original *ASLIB* identified mismatch of opinion between users and staff. The research found staff to be only too aware of these low expectations and that some of their users can be

so easily satisfied is a point of concern to them, as the following quotes illustrate, one respondent observed:

*"I think people's expectations are probably on the low side."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)*

Another commented:

*"You get some people coming into a larger library with a good range, and they'll be surprised that it has it, you know."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)*

Overall however, despite some evidence of low expectations the research found that users had at least realistic expectations and often, high expectations, of the parts of the service that they were using. A finding consistent with other research as *Kinnell and Oda (1996: 133)* state:

"Public libraries in the UK have created high expectations in the minds of funders and users."

Reflecting the finding noted in chapter 3, that there is a lack of service promotion, it became evident that some users were not aware of the breadth of services on offer despite the fact that they use the library frequently. Thus in this respect their expectations were limited or unrealistic.

Users or Customers?

However, changing expectations of the service are not only reflected by users wanting more I.T and weekend and evening opening hours, the research also found evidence to suggest that documents such as the Citizens' Charter have made users more aware of their consumer rights, as one member of staff noted:

*"Well we live in a culture of complaining these days, it's just the way the world is moving."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)*

Another joked:

"People know their rights don't they, the minute anything's wrong and its Anne Robinson isn't it!"
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

This is also something that can be observed in the library literature. The sheer number of articles discussing the application of management strategies such as TQM and SERVQUAL in an information service sector to ensure customers' needs are met and exceeded, (for example: *Kinnell Evans, 1997(b); St Clair, 1997* and *Edwards and Browne, 1995*) is illustrative of a customer culture.

It became evident, that staff do very much view users as their customers and aim, where possible to be responsive to them. Comments ranged from quite simply:

"Well it's all down to customer care isn't it?"
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

To:

"I would suspect that there is more of a customer focus from the customer if you like. People are getting more consumerist about the way they approach us. Rather than, you know, being grateful for the fact that we let them take books out or whatever, they expect things from us now. They expect a range of good materials, a range of material and a standard of service that previously maybe, they just took what they were given. I think that probably that's something that has shifted, and rightly so I'd say. At the end of the day they are the people that pay us."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

Much of the library literature has also reflected this changing attitude as users are now frequently referred to as customers. Whatever they are labelled though, the drive towards customer focus in the public sector and in library services is increasingly apparent. *Fenwick (1995: 47)* observes that:

"The relationship between the local authority and the public is changing. In particular there has been a rapid growth of interest in the public as consumers or customers."

Similarly *Kovel-Jarboe (1996: 609)* notes of library users:

“Although there may be a tendency to resist calling them “customers” library users (patrons, clients etc . . .) have received considerable attention.”

However, despite all of this attention, whether or not users regard themselves as customers is another matter. The research identified that, despite exhibiting customer behaviour in various areas of service provision, particularly in their I.T expectations, users seem to regard themselves as anything but library customers. Labels such as reader, user, member, and borrower were almost universally favoured over customer and client. Even where customer was regarded as an appropriate description it was with some reluctance.

“I suppose I am a borrower but I am also a customer because some of the services I actually pay for, like when I borrow a tape or a CD then I pay for that service.” (Respondent comment. Authority B)

In opposition to this perception of themselves, as some of the evidence already presented suggests, the research found staff to believe that increasingly users perceive themselves as customers. An increase in complaints; people expecting toilet and baby changing facilities in libraries; people expecting coffee shops in larger libraries were all given as examples of how users had exhibited some form of customer behaviour. One respondent observed:

“They do ask for toilets, facilities that sort of thing, and I think if you had coffee machines they would use them.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Across all three participant authorities staff noted a rise in complaints and the fact that users were increasingly prepared to vocalise an issue they were unhappy about, although perhaps this might be expected as all three authorities had instituted some form of complaints / comments procedure. The most extreme example of a user demanding their customer rights is illustrated by the following quote:

“We had a lady come in after it had been in the paper, about how much of our council tax goes for the library service, and she asked if she could do her £7 worth of photocopying because she didn’t take books out. So she thought she was entitled to £7 worth of service and she’d like it in photocopying!”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Although this produced some gasps of amazement from other members of the group, it does illustrate the point very well that users seem increasingly aware that as they pay for the service they are entitled to certain levels of service quality and customer care. From what staff told the research, increasingly if they don’t receive that level of service, users will complain. One respondent suggested that the rise in enquiries for the address of the local MP was evidence of a rise in peoples’ willingness to complain about unsatisfactory service. This raises a serious issue in terms of service management. Whilst the public library service may be regarded as holding a near monopoly at present, as this chapter has illustrated, with the rise in information technology and in-home and in-office information sources, the public library faces an increasing number of competitors. Thus increasingly in the future, if public library users are dissatisfied with the types and levels of service that they receive, they will have the option not only to complain, but also to go elsewhere for their information and recreational needs. Therefore it becomes increasingly important that the public library service adopts appropriate policy and looks to market itself in such a way as to respond to the consumer society that it serves.

Library Policy: Meeting the Marketing Challenge

For everybody it is probably possible to think of an example of an occasion when due to perceived poor service, they have been reluctant to return to a shop, revisit a restaurant or give a bank their business. Given the evidence of higher expectations of services generally, customer care and providing a quality service in today’s society are important factors in ensuring favourable service perceptions are created. Focus group discussions identified something that might be called the “Marks and Spencer factor”, due to the fact that theirs was the

example of customer service that was universally quoted by focus groups.

“If their staff are willing and able shall we say, to give a better standard of care, and then of course if that person’s next port of call is the library they’re going to compare the two things straight away and perhaps we’re coming off second best every time.”

(Comment from focus group. Authority B)

Although given recent publicity about the problems of the company perhaps this is not the best example for the library service to be using. On the other hand, the fall from grace of that much loved British institution could serve as a warning to the library service: complacency in service quality, customer care and responsiveness is dangerous (*Lilley and Usherwood, 2000 – In press*).

The research found that customer care in the participant authorities was largely focused on day to day procedure with a comments / feedback system at the centre. For some staff customer care was another area where they felt that a lack of training possibly let them down. Comments included:

“Customer care tends to be, we got a little bit of customer care training one time, that doesn’t seem to be repeated and new people coming in don’t get any of that training.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

It also became evident that staff were concerned that users view various quality initiatives suspiciously. It was felt that users have seen many organisations adopt the rhetoric of quality but that the evidence of results can sometimes be a bit thin on the ground. One member of staff commented that:

“That’s one of the things that the Conservative government was very keen on, that sort of accountability and all these various things. At the time we all sat down devised a customer care, what we will promise, that we will do this and deliver this and on time, we will know how to use the technology etc . . . Now that sort of went by the by, but the signs are still up, but I don’t know whether anybody reads them.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

The problem for the service is that when these sorts of promises are not met then negative service perceptions are likely to result. This is because making service promises serves to raise service expectations making the gap between

expectations and perceptions even greater if the service fails to deliver at the promised level. *Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 45)* explain:

"Promises made by a service through its media and other communications may potentially raise customer expectations that serve as the standard against which customers assess the service quality."

The research also noted a level of defensiveness from staff when asked about customer care and service quality, that was apparently grounded in the belief that staff in public libraries have been giving a high quality customer focused service for many years. Customer care was very much viewed as a part of what the service does anyway. The following comment being representative:

"We are all giving this service anyway and have done for a good many years. So all of these buzzwords that have come out, "best value", "customer care" and "Citizens' Charter" that we have all had to subscribe to, to be absolutely wonderful, we're already doing that."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

However, at the same time the research found awareness from staff about why ensuring customer care was given is so important to the service. This further reflects the impact of a consumer-oriented society on the perceptions that are formed of the public library service. One respondent commented:

"Today you've got to be active to get them back in again haven't you? You can't just sit back and expect people to use, you have to treat them like valued customers to make sure they come back again."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Yet staff were also concerned that a culture of complaints would leave them responsive to a vocal minority, who might not represent the majority of library users. Similarly the literature observes:

"The crucial question of 'who is the public?' can either be a strength or a weakness of the consumer concept. It may be a strength if any systematic searching-out of consumer perspectives does indeed ensure the inclusion of the various publics; it may be a weakness if the consumer perspective simply means greater attention to the already articulate."
Fenwick (1995: 52)

It was noted that users coming in monthly to borrow light fiction were probably very satisfied with the service and therefore would not have cause to complain or comment on service quality as the service they receive is perceived to be of high quality and is meeting expectations. Comments from staff included:

“Is it not the case that libraries are going with the anecdotal stuff? The vocal complainers again, and we’re not finding out about things for the users who take out their books every month and we never hear from them.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The literature suggests that the relationship between staff and users is crucial in ensuring a customer focus. As Flynn (1993: 155) states:

“The job of dealing with the users should be treated as the most important one in all service organisations.”

Similarly the research found evidence that for many users staff are perceived as crucial, and that users have a high regard for their relationship with staff. As has already been highlighted by chapter 3 staff also have a crucial role to play in the creation of perceptions during the snapshot of experience. Due to the importance of staff in this respect these issues are mentioned only briefly here, as they will be discussed in detail by chapter 6 which will be devoted to staff role.

Given the importance of ensuring high quality customer focused services, however they are labelled or described, the challenge for the public library service becomes, in light of the evidence presented so far, how to “juggle all the balls” and manage expectations and perceptions which are far from uniform. As St. Clair (1997: 85) observes:

“The fact of the matter is that attention to customers does make a difference to the perceptions and expectations of those customers.”

The research found diverse and distinct views from staff on the issue of attempting to manage expectations and perceptions. Universally, it was regarded that there was a need to address the problem of how to “juggle all the balls”, with

staff presenting varied suggestions for how this might be achieved. A common theme was communication, as one participant observed:

“It’s timing, promotion, information to people who come in, outreach, just showing people what we are about.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Another major area for concern was the fact that often the funding let the service down, so given limited resources it would not be possible to manage expectations and perceptions that are ever evolving and changing. One respondent summed this situation up in the following way:

“I think we can firefight but as things stand, that is all we can do, because there’s always going to be another service that comes along, that’s going to change peoples’ expectations without necessarily changing their perceptions. I think we are all familiar with the dual headed nature of our borrowers because they’re human beings and human beings are like that.”
Comment from Focus group (Authority C)

The problem for the library service is how to respond to the diverse expectations and perceptions that are held of it. The question is, is it possible to pay attention to the wants and needs of every customer? Chapter 5 will consider this question in detail.

As this chapter has illustrated the diverse expectations that exist for the service create a conflict for library staff. It is here that the strategies for ensuring service quality and customer care, such as self-assessment and quality initiatives like ISO9000 become important to the service. These offer the opportunity for the service to communicate with its users and overcome some of the barriers to meeting the marketing challenge presented by expectation and perception diversity.

Summary: Reviewing the Challenges

This chapter started by discussing some of the major issues of concern, identified by the research, that the increased role of I.T in library services has created for library staff and users. The sheer volume of data collected by the fieldwork that related to this theme presenting a clear indication of its importance. It is an issue that the research identified to have created many different perceptions and expectations for and about the service. Respondents participating in this research expressed a general expectation that I.T is a valid service diversification for public libraries, users participating expected to find some level of I.T provision in their library, although personal opinion about the nature and extent of this diversification varied greatly. An element of common agreement however, was identified among staff and users regarding the value of technology in maintaining the library's essentiality and in attracting new, younger users into the service.

In terms of the question that this section of the chapter posed: "revolution or evolution?" it was pointed out to the researcher by one of the focus group participants that the current debates about I.T are not the product of some form of technological revolution. Rather that the service has evolved like many others and in this evolution technology has been adopted and embraced.

"There's always something. I mean if we were having this conversation in 1970, then it would be photo charging or maybe a mainframe with a dumb terminal on the counter. It's always going to be happening there are always going to be new things coming along. New things for us to provide, new information for us to get out."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

However, the research evidence presented in this chapter suggests that user I.T expectations are in fact moving at a revolutionary rather than an evolutionary pace. The influence of information technology is felt in so many services that it is really only logical that users expectations of the service in this respect will move quickly. As one respondent commented, I.T is:

“Just part of the 1990s. It’s everywhere. I mean even in supermarkets the tills are computerised now, so its just part of that advance, that makes things easier and quicker.”

Respondent Comment (Authority A)

Perhaps this is the heart of the ASLIB identified mismatch. Out of necessity staff regard technology as evolution but are aware that users are experiencing a revolution. They are aware that they need to provide more and more to meet the snowballing expectations of their users in this respect, but in the main lack the financial where-with-all to move at anything other than an evolutionary pace. In this mismatch, a clear need for the management of expectations and perceptions can be identified. The chapter has explored the potential perceptual problems that can be created by I.T services in the SERVQUAL model’s dimensions alone. However, at a more basic level of service experience, where I.T expectations are not met then the possibility of the formation of a negative perception of the service is increased.

This chapter also discussed the pressure for the library of existing in and serving a society where the emphasis is the customer. The research found that exacerbating high I.T expectations are expectations of the service driven by user experiences of other service industries, such as longer and weekend opening hours, quality services and an increased range of facilities. Set against the society, in which the public sector has suffered at the hands of apparently reducing budgets, this creates a management dilemma for the service, which will be pursued further in chapter 5 where the conflicts created for the service in terms of raised expectations will be discussed.

It was evident that in many senses expectations are higher of the service but users it would appear, do maintain a sympathy for the fact that the library service is publicly funded, however, this sympathy in the main is not enough to temper rising expectations, particularly where I.T is concerned. In fact, in some cases users offered suggestion of how opening hours might be extended without straining budgets. Once more there is evidence of confusion about the service as the traditionally noted low expectations for the public sector meet the rising expectations created by a changing society. The challenges that this presents are

well known and long thought about by staff. However, this also creates a challenge for users in terms of their definition of themselves as users or customers. Despite what the literature suggests, the research found that the resistance to the term customer came from the users themselves, whereas staff have embraced it and the concept of customer care and ensuring service quality as a matter of ensuring library survival.

These issues of confusion and conflict for users and staff alike appear to be the product of experiencing the library service in a society where things are changing, where the lines are being redrawn, communities redefined, and technology progressing at a lightening speed. Whilst professionals might expect these changes to occur and influence expectations, it appears that they have left users confused as to what their role in the library service is. Once more, evidence emerges to account for the mismatch identified by the *ASLIB* research that has formed the basis for this consideration of how perceptions and expectations of the public library service are formed and influenced. This issue of confusion over library role and definition, and the conflict and tension it cause both among and for staff and users, will form the basis of the next chapter as the question “warm and fluffy or cutting edge?” is considered.

Chapter 5 – “Confused Perceptions: Cutting Edge but Warm and Fluffy, Please!”

Introduction

Confusion was the overwhelming theme identified with the forces of change discussed in chapter 4. The role of I.T and the changes occurring to society in terms of the customer orientation of services seem to be leaving users and staff alike confused about the role of the library service and possible directions for the future. The research found evidence of this sense of confusion not only between different groups holding different opinions, but also within individuals. As such it became increasingly evident that the changes occurring in society were impacting on perceptions and expectations by creating confusion about the way the public library service is perceived and what is expected from it. This creates an identity crisis as the service attempts to perform a balancing act and manage expectations and perceptions between the traditional core services and future directions. One respondent neatly characterised this sense of confusion by saying that users are:

“Wanting it all! Wanting the library to be cutting edge but warm and fluffy at the same time!”
Comment from Focus group (Pilot Authority)

This chapter will examine the issues that this sense of confusion creates for the public library service. This was particularly evident in terms of new I.T facilities and the traditional services and role of the library. Evidence of this confusion will be presented and considered against issues of library identity and the sense of ownership that has been identified from public library users. The chapter will consider the impact of increased I.T services and the rise of a consumer society on the wider community role of the library and how the service is facing the challenge of responding to different and dynamic community needs. Whether a rise in I.T services and a customer focus threaten or enhance the traditional community base of the public library will also be examined.

The service is perceived as being uniquely neutral (*Comedia 1993 and 1995*) and this will be considered alongside the identified forces of change. Staff indicated that they feel the service is “filling the gaps” left by other public sector services following the steady attrition of the public sector generally over recent years. As such, the influence of outside agencies will be examined, particularly their role in funding initiatives within the service as it became clear to the researcher that their intervention fuelled confusion among library users and perpetuated the mismatch of opinion evident between library users and library staff.

Finally the chapter will discuss whether the changes being experienced by society are indicative of a move, in library and information service terms, towards a post-modern society, and the possible implications that such a transition might have for the provision of public library services.

A Sense of Confusion

The research found evidence from users that demonstrated a sense of confusion about the direction in which the service should be travelling. This was characterised by conflicting opinions and feelings emerging about I.T and books. It became clear that for many users these two services do not sit comfortably alongside each other at present. Whilst the research found that users expect information technology to play a significant role in the future of the service (as discussed by chapter 4) it also found an overwhelming loyalty to the traditional book based and community services of the library. A desire for the “warm and fluffy” aspects not to be lost to the “cutting edge” was definitely evident.

Despite the 82.5 per cent of users who regard I.T as a challenge necessary for the future survival of the service, when this concept was taken one step further a completely different response was noted. When users were presented with the statement: “*in the public library of the future books will be a thing of the past*”, 67.5 per cent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. Furthermore, some

of the qualitative data gathered in accompaniment to this response revealed the strength of feeling about the statement. Respondents felt that:

“There is NOTHING ever going to replace, psychologically the feeling of a book.”

Respondent Comment (Authority A)

Another respondent stated:

“I strongly disagree. There will ALWAYS be room for books!”

Respondent Comment (Authority B)

Similarly another observed:

“I think books will be around for a long, long while. People will never get tired of reading books, never.”

Respondent Comment (Authority C)

Users do perceive a role for technology in their libraries in fact, as has already been discussed, they have come to expect it, but not and never at the expense of books. As one user explained:

“There is so much material which is more descriptive, you know, moving images and that sort of thing, and information, on information technology, you know CD-ROM and things like that, that I think clearly they have to provide them, but on the other hand, I don't think that it's a substitute for books.”

Respondent Comment (Authority A)

It became clear that striking the balance between the “cutting edge” and the “warm and fluffy” was a major point of concern to staff who are only too aware of the confusion that their users are displaying about library role. This situation is exacerbated by the harsh realities imposed by funding decisions, as increasingly difficult choices have to be made between services, as the money simply is not available to do everything. The focus groups revealed staff to believe that part of this problem is of their own making that as a community yet consumer responsive service they suffer from trying to be “all things to all people”. Comments included:

"I mean it's awfully hard to define precisely what the library is and what its role should be."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

Another member of staff stated:

"We're constantly trying to be all things to all people, but because you can't focus on any mutual target then you feel you're never going to satisfy everyone all of the time are."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

This is a problem that has also been identified by previous research. *Astbury (1994: 135)* quotes *Comedia (1993)*:

"Librarians suffer, according to Comedia, from trying to be all things to all people and consequently they present a blurred image to the public."

Astbury (1994: 136) goes on to state:

"Librarians have become unsure about the precise nature of their role. In short librarians are experiencing an identity crisis."

The challenge for the service and its staff becomes how to perform the balancing act and manage a service successfully to ensure that it appeals to new users and moves with the times, whilst not alienating traditional service users. A challenge that is highlighted by the library literature:

"Public libraries are involved in servicing the library and information needs of a multitude of market segments, including: children and young people; ethnic groups in the community; business; local politicians; tourists; teachers and lecturers; hospital patients. Balancing the needs, demands and available resources for the various segments are not mutually exclusive."

Kinnell and MacDougall (1992: 24)

Staff participating in the research indicated that they were well aware of the dangers inherent in trying to perform such a balancing act. The following comment indicates a common fear that accompanies these pressures:

"You know if we just stay with the books we're going to disappear aren't we?"

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Similarly, it has been argued by the professional literature:

"I would argue that resisting the opportunities of the Internet fails to recognise that we are in a period of significant change, both on planet public libraries and in the universe that is society." Batt (1999: 13)

The dilemma facing the service is that whilst some users will get what they want from service diversification, the prime example being I.T, some traditional users may be alienated. As one respondent observed:

"I'm not convinced that information technology is the library's role in life. I think information technology is a thing on its own and I think books, books are very, very special and my personal view is that the two are separate. It's not everybody, contrary to belief, that's prepared to sit and look at a screen."

Respondent Comment (Authority B)

So what about the users who want the service to just stick with books?

Alienating a traditional service base is a danger. The literature on marketing services suggests that:

"When companies focus too much on attracting new customers, they may fail to understand the changing needs and expectations of their current customers." Zeithaml and Bitner (1996:40)

Evidence from the fieldwork illustrates that there is a painful awareness of this dilemma among staff. All of the focus groups touched on this problem during their discussions. The dilemma was considered not only in terms of new services alienating traditional service users, but also in terms of:

"What happens when all our older generation die off and we're left with the people who've never used the library in the last 20 years"
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Another group discussed the same issue:

“Well I think what we have to bear in mind is that these elderly people are going to die, so where are our next users coming from?”

The discussion continued:

“I think a lot of our elderly users have been library users of long standing because they are just in that age group that were brought up with books, brought up to value books . . . Now the next generation if you like, people around our age group, a lot of them didn't have the same sort of bookish experience, we were the first T.V generation.”

To which another group member responded:

“The next generation – It's all I.T.”
From Focus Group Discussion (Authority B)

Not always as directly apparent as I.T, the impact of the consumer society has created confusion among users, as chapter 4 has discussed in detail, particularly because their service expectations conflict with their perceptions of public sector funding. This is characterised by the desire for high quality customer oriented services, open at convenient times and offering exactly what the individual would like, tempered by a sympathy towards the inherent problems of public sector funding. This highlights very clearly the challenges that I.T and serving a changing society present to the public library service as it seeks to find the right balance between the consumer and community.

Wider Issues of Library Role

The increased emphasis on I.C.T in the provision of all aspects of library services and the desire to be responsive to the needs and wants of the individual customer, is of particular concern to the public library service where the library is serving and fulfilling a distinct community role. I.T has far reaching implications for the public library service in terms of the unique and unrivalled position that the public library has in serving the information, education, and leisure needs of its community. As Proctor (1999: 4) states:

“The contribution of the local library to community life and individual well-being is far reaching, distinctive and irreplaceable.”

The unique community role that the public library service fulfils has been widely noted by previous research (for example, *Proctor et al., 1998; Comedia 1993 and ASLIB 1995*). *Muddiman and Black (1993)* observed of the public library that:

"Its ambience often successfully crossed the boundaries between learning and leisure, enlightenment and entertainment, casual use and dedicated study, which many other arts and cultural facilities failed to do."

Despite the fact that in many ways the service is responding to the demands of a consumer society, the research collected a vast amount of evidence from users and staff to illustrate the strength with which its community role is felt. Users were keen to talk about the library service as a community resource. Comments included:

"It's available to anyone who wants to join it, there's no exceptions to anybody."
Respondent Comment (Authority B)

Another respondent noted:

"Libraries are the only place that a lot of people can get information."
Respondent Comment (Authority C)

Library staff were always keen to emphasise the community role of the service, with many examples to choose from, the following is presented because of the strength of feeling that it represents:

"The library's remained amazingly graffiti free all the time, in an area where everything is sprayed to death, and the temptation of nice new wall space, but for some reason they didn't, they took the building as being theirs somehow."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

This sense of ownership was found to be prevalent across all of the participant authorities, and was most notable in the language that users used in talking about

their library experience. Libraries and librarians were commonly labelled as “mine”, “my”, “ours”. One respondent went so far as to tell the researcher that:

“My librarians look after me marvellously.”
Respondent Comment (Authority A)

Staff indicated that this perception of ownership and community was particularly strong with mobile services. This was substantiated by data from mobile users who were interviewed. In one particular instance the user had started to use the mobile library and expressed great loyalty and a sense of ownership towards it, although she had no previous library experience having never previously used a static service. Staff described this sense of community generated by the mobile service as follows:

“They’re fiercely loyal to the mobile library. I once went out on one of the mobiles I manage and someone said ‘are you the inspector? Have you come to spy on us?’ Using exactly those words. And when I explained that I was the manager they said: ‘You won’t cut it will you? We need our bus’”.
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The research also found that often the collective community that the library served was talked about as if it were one customer. This was particularly the case with library staff working in branch rather than central service points. The library was described as a “community centre” and of particular concern to staff was that opening hours were responsive to community needs rather than representing a blanket authority policy. One respondent observed:

“I gather that they wanted it so that all the branch libraries were the same hours. Well that is not possible. What suits one community doesn’t suit another.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

The research also found that staff felt that the library was considered to be a fairly neutral resource within the community, despite the concerns discussed in chapter 3 that being a council institution may be a barrier to library use. This is consistent with findings from previous research. *Comedia (1993: 2)* state of the library, that:

“It was perceived as being ‘neutral or democratic territory, open to all, where people could experience their identity as citizens rather than as consumers.”

In each authority examples of how the library’s perceived neutrality had attracted use were presented. The most frequently quoted example was the use of the library for information that could be obtained from other agencies, because the library was perceived to be less judgmental and more acceptable than other agencies, particularly benefits information.

“We do get people coming in rather than going go to the benefits agency because we’re a more acceptable face.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

However, concerns were raised about the pressure that this puts onto the library service that staff perceived, is already filling the gaps of other agencies:

“We’re not citizens’ advice trained, we can’t know everything, but we’re probably expected to.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Another respondent noted the uniqueness of the library service as a local government department in as much as there are few barriers between library staff and the public that they serve. She observed that:

“We’re one of the few government departments that don’t have any barriers. We’ve got a desk between us and the public, but no glass or anything.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Similarly another respondent noted:

“I suppose one of the most unique aspects of the library is that you can talk to somebody just out in the library, whereas most other services are behind a desk or something.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

This raised another issue about our changing society, which was also noted by staff in other authorities. In filling the gaps left by other agencies, library staff perceive themselves as being increasingly at risk from violent behaviour as tempers fray when information is not available. One respondent commented:

“Once the squeeze is put on somewhere else, once the other avenues of information and advice, or counselling are squeezed to, either somewhere geographically different, or out of existence altogether, then we end up being the only kid on the block. We’re the only place they can go and peoples’ expectations of being able to get the information don’t change, it’s just that they have to divert to us.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

In one authority staff reported a recent incident where the police had been called to the library to defuse a potentially dangerous situation. Similarly staff in another authority reported the installation of panic buttons. It became clear that staff fear that these changes in society will affect the very personal nature of the service that makes it so special for many users (which will be explored in greater detail by chapter 6), and thus affect the way in which it is perceived. One member of staff observed of this:

“Somebody always forgets their glasses because they want help from that particular member of staff they like, and we all do that for them quite willingly.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The challenge for the service in terms of future direction is how to integrate information technology, other new services and a responsiveness to its customers, successfully without threatening this perceived neutrality, and unique approachability and hence the community role that the library serves. No easy task, as one respondent observed:

“Maybe some people feel disenfranchised by the library service because they aren’t computer literate and so can’t actually use the facilities then the library’s failing the actual community it’s serving. And that troubles me because I think the whole, really the whole point of the library is that it is accessed by the community.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

Yet the research also found evidence of I.T being used by the service to enhance the library's community role by providing community training in I.T, and with networked PCs allowing access from small satellite branches, to greater resources without users having to travel to larger service points. One respondent commented:

"The more isolated communities need the I.T. more than the large communities because it's a way of them getting access to more resources."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

However, these examples proved to be the exception rather than the rule. In fact the other side of this was also debated by one group who discussed, in direct contrast, the fact that smaller community libraries could be closed to allow funds to be channelled into larger libraries and thus up to the minute I.T could be maintained and I.T. expectations met, the argument being that in an increasingly mobile society, the larger service points would be easily accessible to most users. Needless to say there were many opinions tendered during this discussion and participants did not have any kind of consensus of opinion on this matter. However, one respondent did observe that:

"If you do keep all your community libraries and your smaller service points then of course you're spreading the jam ever more thinly aren't you? From a shrinking pot."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Muddiman and Black (1997: 99) discuss one example where exactly this has happened:

"Indeed, one Northern metropolitan district was forced to abandon its attempt to develop a network of 'community libraries . . . where the size and nature of collections, the range of materials and activities and opening hours were intended to reflect local library staffs' interpretation of community needs', in favour of a system based on 'key libraries, which will in future form the irreducible core of the service.'"

As already suggested, the library's community role was also found to be of great importance to users however, in terms of the perceived neutrality, the research

found a divided opinion. In fact when presented with the statement: *“Library users as a whole reflect a middle class bias”*, 40 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement and 40 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed with it. Of particular concern for the service was the fact that in Authority C both focus groups discussed examples of users expecting to have to pay for library services. Comments included:

“A high percentage expect they'll have to pay to join.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

And:

“I haven't dealt with a lot of new borrowers in the short time that I've been here, but I've had several people say 'how much is it to join the library?'”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Perhaps this is representative of the perceived shift towards a consumer society where the public perceives that it will have to pay for good quality services. In a society where there has been an erosion of the welfare state driven principles, peoples' expectations of what they are likely to be entitled to as a free service have been lowered. Similarly it could be suggested that this finding is indicative of the whole sense of confusion about the service, as it is common for library authorities to charge for some services such as the loan of audio-visual materials. Therefore it is not surprising that people expect to have to pay for the service, as they may be aware of those charges, a situation that is exacerbated by a lack of standardisation between library authorities.

However, public perceptions that they are going to have to pay for library services may impact on service expectations in two ways. The first is that a perceived “payment for use” will act as a barrier to service use and prevent some members of the community accessing the service in the first place because they perceive that they cannot afford it. The second is that the service is not perceived as public sector. Subsequently expectations may be very high before service use and a user may be disappointed by the level of service that they

actually receive, as they had expected more resources and better facilities. This may result in the service not being used again. Evidently there are issues of service promotion to be considered in this respect to ensure that users are aware of what elements of the service they have to pay for and at what levels.

The library's community importance also returns the discussion to the essential dilemma that new technology and its opportunity presents the service and that is of, how to be "all things to all people", how to perform that particularly difficult balancing act. The research found that the library is many things to many people and that individuals perceive it very differently. However, there is one common perception, perhaps representative of the rise of consumerism in society, and that is that it is *their* library service and as such it should meet *their* expectations.

Wide ranging expectations. The following analysis of responses to some of the Likert statements used on the user telephone interview gives a small indication of the variety of perceptions experienced by the research.

Over half of the user respondents participating thought that the library should try to be fun, with 52.5 per cent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement: "*public libraries need to offer services that will attract me to use the library for the sheer fun of being there.*" Yet more than half of the respondents also agreed that the library is a place for study with 57.5 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement: "*The public library is a place of study – a public work place.*"

These confused perceptions are felt by staff and are also exhibited by them. In all the focus group discussions some debate between the information and entertainment roles of the service took place. In one particular group this developed into a heated debate as to whether fulfilling the entertainment needs of future generations was a suitable role for the public library:

"As the future unfolds then other forms of leisure material will be required by the generations that now watch videos rather than reads books."

"Yes, but is that our responsibility, that's what I'm saying?"

"I don't know, because we've had to provide fiction, light fiction as a leisure facility then I think we've got to provide, light technology."

"Why? Why have we got to provide that?"

"To get people in."

From Focus Group Discussion (Authority A)

This became a recurrent theme among the staff participating, the use of I.T in attracting new service users. This dilemma of what the library should be trying to be and to whom has also been noted by the literature:

"The role played by public libraries is more than ever ambiguous, imprecise and even contested virulently."

Giappiconi (1995: 101)

This debate is intensified by the library's community role. Should the service be looking into services that maybe reflect a consumerist want rather than a community need. It becomes increasingly difficult to draw the lines and decide which uses of information technology represent a wider community interest and which are satisfying the demand of the individual. At what point do many individuals' wants become a community's need? One respondent considered:

"Libraries are all things to all people, but of course they're not and we haven't got everything."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The literature also addresses this dilemma as *Gaster (1995: 5)* observes:

"A community perspective may be very different from and clash directly with that of individual customers."

However, despite all of the debates about library role, as noted by chapter 4 the role of I.T in fulfilling it is accepted. In fact it was observed by staff in more than one of the focus groups that failing to deliver information technology, did in fact amount to a failure to deliver the public library service's commitment to life long learning, and as such potential failure in a major community role, computer

literacy being as urgent a problem to address in today's society as any other form of literacy. Observations included:

"The role of the library traditionally was to educate people who didn't have access to formal education. You could go to the library and learn what you needed to know. These days people have more formal education but what they are lacking is the I.T skills and they might not want to go on a course, they might not be able to. And I think that the library has to step into that role and provide computer facilities for people who haven't got them at home. They're not going to be able to get jobs and things like that unless they've got those skills. So I don't think it is something that you can say well shall we go down the I.T road or not, you have to do those things as part of your service."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Users also noted the fulfilment of such a valuable role by the service. One commented:

"Everything that's available to the general computer owner should be available in a public library for those people who can't afford to set up a computer or lack the knowledge."
Respondent Comment (Authority A)

Yet overall, users participating in the research expressed a more divided opinion about the educational role of the library in general. In response to the statement: *"it is more important to me that the library is an education support centre than that it stock popular materials for loan"*, 47.5per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this and 37.5per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The library does not only have a role to fulfil in terms of its commitment to life long learning, but as a major community information resource it is necessary that the service can offer an environment in which the community can access and exploit the information available through new technology. In ensuring a commitment to this role the service can attempt to bridge the widening gap between the information rich and the information poor that is exacerbated by the gap between the computer literate and illiterate. As *Astbury (1994:134)* states:

“Especially in the public library context there will be a need for professional librarians to provide the human interface between the individual and the technology and in assisting the many citizens who are unskilled both in defining and in articulating their information needs.”

Staff appeared to believe that the library’s perceived neutrality would be advantageous in perpetuating the role of technology in this way. As one respondent commented:

“They feel safe. They know the library staff and they know the library staff aren’t going to treat them like idiots, so a lot of them feel safe and will try the I.T.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Again users interviewed also noted this. It was observed that:

“People who’ve never come across I.T before, I think they are frightened of it, where as if it’s in the library and they could get someone to show them how to use it, they wouldn’t be so scared of it.”

Respondent Comment (Authority B)

This unique approachability is something that has obviously been observed by other agencies, with the role of public libraries in the BBC’s “Computers don’t bite” initiative providing a high profile example. Yet, in undertaking this supporting role in terms of I.T education the service is faced with the problems of resources and training. Based on the evidence staff have presented to this research it is apparent that these need to be addressed before the public library service can satisfactorily fulfil this role.

Influence of Outside Agencies

The “Computer’s don’t bite” initiative was used in chapter 3 to illustrate the role of outside agencies in creating expectations. It provided a useful illustration of how expectations about the service and what it can realistically do, can be raised by agencies outside its control. However in terms of information and provision, outside agencies now pose a threat to the service and a threat of increasing dimensions. As *Kinnell Evans (1997: 3)* argues:

“Information is no longer just the preserve of the information professional”

Similarly, Holt (1996: 553) observes that:

“To become, and to remain, essential to their constituents, public libraries need to adapt the new person-to-person information technology.”

However, despite the informational role that the service evidently fulfils, some writers question whether or not this is in fact its primary function:

“In library circles great emphasis is placed on the informative function of the library. Whether such a view of libraries corresponds to the reality in all cases is open to doubt. To a large proportion of the users of public libraries, for instance, the function of the library is primarily recreational.”
Prins et al. (1995: 17)

It has to be noted that the majority of service users interviewed for this research indicated a primarily recreational use of the service. Staff also felt that this is the primary use being made of the service at present:

“I think it’s true to say that most people think of libraries as books and entertainment rather than information.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

However, it is evident that in the participant authorities I.T is not only being employed to fulfil an informational role. One authority was about to loan Play Stations and another was debating whether or not to loan CD-ROMs and computer games. Library staff were concerned that they have to meet these demands to ensure service survival, further evidence perhaps of the service responding to the demands of a consumer society over and above the needs of the community. One commented:

“There are increasing demands, the public has an increasing range of things being offered to it occupy it or amuse it, or educate it or whatever and we are fighting our corner against an increasing number of competitors. So to do that we have to, to some degree, give the punters what they want, because otherwise we are dead.”

Comment from Focus group (Authority A)

Another stated:

“There are more things in competition with us these days. More things people can do with their spare time. Places even to go for information to some extent. So you have to think of people as customers rather than they just take it or they leave it I mean it’s not like that anymore.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Where resources are stretched though, the dilemma for librarians increases.

Despite facing competition in a range of forms and organisations, the service has to fund the services it offers and as such faces the problem of deciding whether or not to charge for a service it provides. For example, charging for the Internet would arguably prove a barrier to use for those people who need it most, those who cannot afford it in their own homes. As such this has the potential to widen the gap between the information rich and the information poor. Furthermore, the literature warns of the dangers of adopting a service solely for its income generating potential:

“Some libraries, for example are tempted to justify the creation of new services by the income generated. This pricing strategy means that a policy of profit is substituted for a policy of public interest.”

Giappiconi (1995: 102)

Yet despite the emphasis that is placed upon increasing competition for the service, the research found evidence that there remains a certain amount of complacency among some staff, complacency that users had also noted particularly in the lack of advertising they felt was undertaken even at a more basic promotional level. In all of the focus groups staff were keen to indicate how satisfied their users tell them that they are and how much better they perform than their neighbouring authorities! Although this could be interpreted as complacency, it may actually reflect the vulnerability that service staff

actually feel under the threat of increased competition as highlighted by the above comments.

The research found little evidence that users are aware of the competitors of the public library service other than other library services and local authorities themselves. Although one did state that:

“I think they've got to keep up with I.T, otherwise people are going to look elsewhere for their information.”
Respondent Comment (Authority B)

However, comments of this nature were in the minority and perhaps reflect the fact that those users are frequent library users who have a need for the public library service and as such are very loyal to it. It is also indicative of the fact that the majority of users interviewed used the service in a predominantly recreational sense. This suggests that perhaps users do not perceive the other things that they do in their leisure time as competing with their library use.

The influence of government initiatives and media reports were also felt by staff to create expectations that the service was not always able to fulfil. Although external influencing factors have been considered in chapter 3, further note is made of them here as they become representative of a consumer society where customers needs and wants are responded to with a sense of urgency. Staff observations of the impact they had experienced on service expectations included:

“People expect it to be instant. A book's published and they expect it to be in the library the next day, the government announces an I.T initiative and it's in the library the next day.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The research found that outside agencies impact on the considerations, perceptions and expectations of the public library service in other ways other than specific and direct competition to the services on offer. In two of the participating authorities some I.T provision had been funded by grants sourced from an outside agency. These ranged from the E.U., to national government

and included libraries acting as a site for a non-library, but local authority funded information technology initiative.

The need to attract outside funding is something that service staff recognise as increasingly they look to partnerships to enable them to respond to rising customer expectations and to provide the services they are aware libraries can and should offer. This was particularly recognised by one of the focus groups that observed:

*“We haven’t got the expertise to get in the field of applying for grants.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)*

This group felt that there was a need for the service to have a specialist who could take on the role of putting the bids to various organisations such as the E.U., The Prince’s Trust and the Lottery, to attract the funding that the service could use.

It was also noted that the use of outside funding by the service had further exacerbated the problem of confused and fragmented perceptions and expectations of it. In Authority C, it was noted that expectations were confused as to which service points to expect to find Internet access in. Due to the fact that some service points are sites for a separate local authority I.T initiative some smaller service points have the technology that bigger service points do not. Staff felt, however, that users do not make the distinction between separate initiatives and the library, they just know that a smaller service point has Internet access and therefore expect to find it when they use a larger service point. As one group member illustrated:

*“That was certainly the case at ‘X’ library, because it’s a large library, second biggest in the authority, people were astonished that we didn’t have Internet access.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)*

The research did not interview any users who expressed this particular concern about the services offered by different service points, but what was noted, as discussed in chapter 3, was the fact that users detailed how they use different

service points to fulfil different needs, for example, using a local branch for fiction lending and a central library for information, and in some cases visiting a neighbouring authority as well. However, staff in Authority C indicated that they had directly experienced this confusion about the lack of consistency between service points:

“They’re always surprised, they imagine that the technology would be here before a small library like us got it, and of course they just see it as another part of the library and we have to explain that it is nothing to do with the library service.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C).

Thus the involvement of outside agencies would appear to add to the services’ problem of attempting to manage the cutting edge and warm and fluffy perceptions of it, by creating further perceptual confusion of the cutting edge services that the library provides.

The creation of expectations about I.T due to the lack of a standardised service was widely noted by the other focus groups, with examples of neighbouring authorities perpetuating certain expectations and perceptions of the authority as a result of the services that they provide. One group commented:

“It’s quite true about influence. If our neighbour is lending CD-ROMs then they come in here and expect to be able to borrow CD-ROMs.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

This provides another example of why users are making use of several different service points to get what they want from the library service generally. Furthermore, this finding also suggests that users are thinking like consumers rather than users, accessing different service points to best meet their needs, just as a customer might have their mortgage with one bank and their investments with another to ensure the best interest rates for both.

The research fieldwork with users identified this as exacerbating a lack of clarity in the library perception, that users have to some extent lost sight of what they want and expect from a library service. Increased service diversity therefore has

blurred the lines in terms of perceived service expectations. One staff participant observing this problem stated:

“I think we’ve got to re-educate users to a certain extent, we’re not all things to all people, we’ve got to be clearer about what we’re trying to do.”

Comment from Focus group (Authority A)

Towards a Post-Modern Society?

The community perception of the service is perhaps one of the strongest perceptions that exists of it. Previous research (for example, *Proctor et al., 1998*) has documented this in the way users return to community libraries after periods of closure and in the campaigns from communities to prevent library closure. Similarly, previous user studies have identified the significance of the library’s community role, *Comedia (1993: 35)* observing that:

“When dealing with social provision in a community hard-pressed by economic and social disadvantage, demographic rates of participation or high levels of membership might be much less important than the existence of a valuable support service for significant, though numerically small sections of the community.”

This is a role that the research found staff to feel particularly strongly about. All of the focus groups mentioned, by name, one particular character that would be seen in the library frequently. The value of the social function of the service particularly for older users was also widely noted. One focus group participant stated:

“It’s a common experience for, mainly for the elderly, to come in and say ‘I don’t know what I’d do if it wasn’t for the library . . . and they come in and tell all the staff their problems and discuss their medical ailments with them. We’re like a social services department who just happen to lend books and AV as well!”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Users also noted this valuable function for the library:

*"I don't think it's just fiction and reference nowadays, in fact it has become quite a meeting place actually."
Respondent Comment (Authority C)*

as have previous studies. Proctor (1999: 4) observes:

"Through its social activities, we gained a strong impression of the library as a multi-directional 'information junction' with users as active participants."

However, despite this community emphasis the public library exists in a society increasingly organised around and responsive to the customer. Given this, the literature suggests that a conflict of interest is inevitable:

*"The concept of the public as a holistic import as 'the public' somehow refers to a collective entity. There is therefore constant tension between the individualistic connotation of 'interest' and the holistic connotation of 'public'."
Lane (1993: 7)*

Chapter 4 illustrated examples of users behaving like customers and that expectations of the public library service are to some extent changing, representing a desire for a customer orientated service as opposed to a community orientation. As one member of staff observed:

*"I think the public are much more aware of customer care, they just expect it now."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)*

This is hardly surprising considering that we all live, shop, bank, work and so on in a society where customer interests are given such high priority.

Yet as this chapter has discussed, the community role of the service is also considered as very important, increasing the tension between two areas of service provision and focus that are naturally at opposite ends of a continuum. This exacerbates the confusion about the service as its role is no longer clearly defined

but increasingly it faces the impossible task of meeting the demands of being “all things to all people”.

Society in the 1990s has also seen the culmination of the steady decline of the public sector, with the erosion of funding and resources taking its toll. At the same time, an increased emphasis on the private sector founded imperatives of quality; managerialism and the emphasis on the consumer and his / her rights, have filtered through to the public sector, as *Pollitt (1993: 11)* has observed:

“The transfer during the last decade or two, of managerialism from private-sector corporations to welfare state services represents the injection of an ideological ‘foreign body’ into a sector previously characterised by quite different traditions of thought.”

Similarly *Kinnell (1995: 267)* observes:

“In the UK, in particular, there has been a distinctive cultural shift to entrepreneurialism throughout public sector services. Private-sector, for profit values and business practices are being grafted on to public ethics.”

The state of the public sector and the society, in which the service exists and serves, makes this confusion all the more intense, a public sector that *Ranson and Stewart (1994: 3)* describe as:

“Beleaguered: its rationale doubted, its effectiveness and efficiency derided and its resources depleted.”

Similarly, *Glass Schuman (1998: 50)* warns that:

“Keeping the “public” in public libraries will not be easy. We live in a time when the very idea of government and public sector is under attack.”

These significant changes in the public sector are symptomatic of a transition by society as a whole to a post-modern era, at which the consumer is placed firmly at the centre. All of this presents the public library service with a management crisis as often-reducing budgets are left to manage higher expectations.

This considered, the identified sense of confusion between a desire for the new and dynamic “cutting edge” and the desire not to lose the traditional and safe “warm and fluffy” is not entirely surprising. As has been noted, the research found users to be sympathetic towards the service as a public sector institution but at the same time the customer imperative evident in other services also influences service expectations, usually in direct opposition to what is known about the state of publicly funded institutions. As *Greenhalgh et al. (1995: 65)* suggest:

“The requirement of a universal service to prove universal use has been overlaid with current management philosophies to make certain that services are customer driven.”

Resulting from this emphasis towards the individual customer by society is the fact that the people the library service serves themselves, are working different hours, including weekends and evenings. Thus it becomes harder for these users to get to the library service; expectations for opening hours are therefore inevitably influenced. Similarly, as has been discussed by chapter 4, the research found examples of communities where large proportions of the population commute out of the community and so are unable to access a community library that opens from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. In other words the impact of a consumer society is influencing the dynamics of the community, and as such is threatening the traditional community role of the library.

However, despite all of this, despite the fact that the research found evidence of raised expectations from users particularly in terms of service quality, accessibility, availability and customer service, there is also an argument to be presented that the changing nature of society makes the community role of the library, all the more important. In fact some would suggest that the consumer society has created a need for the library to be community focused. *Muddiman and Black (1997: 102)* argue that:

“Consumerist approaches appear now to represent a dominant paradigm of public library management and incorporate previous initiatives connected with marketing, total quality management and quality assurance and customer care. Perhaps, indeed, in the long term, consumerism represents an opportunity for the rebirth of community Librarianship of a kind.”

Returning to a point that has been made about the service since the 1970s (for example by *Browne-Mairead (1976)*), this and previous chapters have discussed a beleaguered and declining public sector that has left librarians and library staff feeling as though they are “filling the gaps” left by other agencies and services, including education, citizens’ advice, benefits and even care in the community and social services. As the discussion from one focus group highlighted:

“I think we’re finding it more difficult. We’re having to adapt all the time because society as a whole is changing, we’re getting different types of people coming in. I mean we’ve had these aggression and violence courses, because we have people coming in who’ve got drug related mental problems and so we’re finding that we are having to try and change to adapt to that.”

To which another group member added:

“We’re care in the community now aren’t we?”

And another remarked:

*“Yes, you do find yourself being a social worker to some extent.”
From Focus Group Discussion (Authority B)*

This chapter has also considered the importance of the library’s community role in terms of retraining and life long learning, particularly in ensuring that the gap between the information rich and information poor does not widen further to mirror the gap between the consumer rich and the consumer poor. In this respect it becomes evident that despite the fact that a post-modern consumer oriented society creates tensions for the library service, it also creates a need for the library to fulfil its traditional community focused role. It is therefore somewhat inevitable that trying to exist at both of the opposite extremes along the community and consumer continuum will create conflict and confusion for library service users and staff alike.

Sanderson (1992: 22) argues that if the service does not serve both customer and community it cannot provide a quality service:

“If quality is defined solely in terms of customer wants and expectations, it will fail adequately to address the extent to which wider needs of communities are being met.”

Similarly *Holt (1996: 548)* observes that:

“Even the best customer services are hollow if they do not meet essential community needs.”

Whether or not these shifts in society represent a move towards a: *“post- modern Britain where the old narrative of the public interest is one that is increasingly difficult to sustain as what is public diversifies and fragments” (Muddiman and Black, 1997: 149)* could be debated at length. Labelling these changes does not necessarily help the public library service come to terms with the difficult task of managing the confusion that existing in such a changing society presents.

Summary: Confusion Considered

This chapter has explored the consequences identified by the research, of existing in a changing society. The research found that the impact of information technology and a consumer orientation in society has created confusion among library service users and staff, confusion that is reflected by confused expectations and perceptions of what the service is and what the service should be trying to be. This is hardly surprising as *Muddiman and Black (1997: 100)* observe:

“What McKee (1987: 22) saw as a ‘new paradigm – information technology, and commerce’ began to erode the traditional public service ethos of the library service.”

In these terms the research identified users and staff as exhibiting confusion wanting a library service that is “Cutting edge and warm and fluffy at the same

time". Perhaps of greatest concern was the potential impact of I.T on the wider community based role of the service, particularly amongst staff who recognised the possibilities of harsh decisions to come in this respect, particularly in the light of funding restraints. Staff also indicated that they directly feel the pressure of the decline of other services in the public sector, a common theme discussed by all of the focus groups was that increasingly libraries are "filling the gaps" in a very diverse way across a range of services.

Of overwhelming concern to users appeared to be that the library performs a very difficult balancing act ensuring that they move with the times and embrace I.T, but not, and never, at the expense of the existing book based services. It became clear that users are concerned that the price paid for I.T must not be the traditional services, which are currently on offer and to which users are committed and loyal. On the whole, users participating in this research still regard the book-based services as being the predominant role of the public library service, and the research found its respondents predominantly to be recreational users of the library service.

At the same time the research has identified a huge conflict existing for staff and users alike as the previously clear boundaries of library role become blurred in a haze of technological possibilities. The research found in contrast to the traditionally low expectations that the service experiences, I.T expectations appear to be created at a much higher level. Even where users express a sympathetic understanding of library finances and where they perceive the service as being predominantly book-based they would also like to see CD-ROMs and the Internet in their library. However, the research found that where outside agencies contribute to funding such I.T initiatives they only serve to add to the identified sense of confusion as the service increasingly lacks any form of standardisation or logical location of such facilities across authorities.

This creates another juggling act for librarians to perform as the service tries to ensure favourable service perceptions are created at all levels by all users and potential users. In trying to be all things to all people the service is performing an increasingly difficult and precarious act. Through this research it became

evident that staff feel that some of the “balls” it is currently attempting to juggle are likely to get dropped if the service continues to define itself as being everything to everyone. If the service can define more clearly what it is trying to be, rather than just trying to be everything to everyone, perhaps expectations of the library service can be better managed as an alternative to ensuring service essentiality into the year 2000.

This chapter has also considered the rise of the consumer in terms of implications for the community role of the service. The research found evidence of a community respect for the library often attributed to its perceived neutrality. Similarly the language used by individual service users highlights the sense of ownership that is felt towards a library by the people that use it. This is something unique to the public library service that gives it the potential to use the changes occurring in society to its advantage particularly in terms of life long learning and community information provision.

The chapter concluded by considering the debate on post-modernism. The changes impacting on the library service from society discussed by this and previous chapters, would tend to indicate that the public library service is existing in and serving a post-modern society. New technology and an increasing emphasis on the individual as a customer have redefined traditional communities and along with them societal values. The idea of the “public” has indeed been fragmented in recent years and technology has changed the way in which we need to and do interact with the people around us. At the same time the public sector has undergone radical changes summed up by *Ranson and Stewart (1994: 4)* in the following way:

“The values of the private sector have in recent times come to dominate thinking about every type of organisation. If public organisations were only private, it is contended, then problems of efficiency and bureaucracy would disappear.”

Whether the post-modern definition is subscribed to or not the research found that a changing society heightens the natural tensions occurring between new technology and traditional services, the community and the consumer as staff and

users alike attempt to formulate their response to these changes. It is little wonder that users are exhibiting confused perceptions about the library service when they are confused at whether to perceive themselves as library customers or not.

This sense of confusion creates confused perceptions and expectations, which often do not coexist comfortably. This creates implications for managing the service in ensuring that where possible the service can create that positive snapshot of experience identified as being so crucial by chapter 3. As already stated, for a service that tries to be all things to all people this is no easy task. At the heart of this, trying to manage the confusion created by a changing society, are library staff who are themselves finding confusion in the continually changing and evolving expectations and perceptions of the service. The research identified library staff as holding the key to the creation and management of expectations and perceptions. Their role will be considered by chapter 6 “Library Staff: Perception creators and expectation managers.”

Chapter 6 – “Library Staff – Perception Creators and Expectation Managers”

Introduction

Library staff are crucial in the library’s response to the challenges presented by a changing society and the confusion that it creates. They also form the first point of contact with the service and are instrumental in most service experiences. To all intent and purpose, in this respect the staff *are* the library service. This is widely noted by the literature. *Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 106)* observe that:

“If a customer is interacting with a firm for the first time, that initial encounter will create a first impression of the organization. In these first encounter situations, the customer frequently has no other basis for judging the organization, and the initial phone contact or face-to-face experience with a representative of the firm can take on excessive importance in the customer’s perceptions of quality.”

Prins et al. (1995: 11) note that:

“The literature reveals that the image of the library and the image of the librarian are effectively inseparable.”

The staff participating in the research also observed:

“There’s more interaction between customers and staff in library services and I just think that people affect the image of the service more than any other single factor.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Another commented that:

“We’re there dealing with the public direct. When they see us, they see us as the library service don’t they?”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

As such, as discussed in chapter 3, library staff perform a vital role in the “snapshot” process and can therefore make the difference between the creation of positive and negative service perceptions. In this respect staff, through the relationships that they create with users can be regarded as key to the successful promotion of the service on a day-to-day basis.

This relationship was an overarching theme identified by the research, with evidence emerging from users and staff in terms of its importance. This chapter will discuss this evidence in four sections as the role of library staff in the expectation and perception relationship is considered. Firstly this chapter will examine staff perceptions of themselves. This section will discuss the professionalism that exists among library staff and the pride and regard that they exhibit for the service and consider it in terms of the different levels of staff participating in the research. Alongside this, the experiences of library staff of different levels, in terms of the way users perceive them will be examined. Some of the literature (e.g. *Kovel-Jarboe, 1996* and *St Clair, 1997*) identifies professionalism as a potential barrier to quality improvement in library services and this potential problem will be examined against the findings of the research.

The chapter will continue by examining library users’ perceptions of library staff. The research illustrated that staff form the focal point of the service for many users and as such users exhibited strong feelings about staff characterised by a sense of ownership, as illustrated in chapter 5. This will be discussed in association with evidence from the Likert scaled responses of the user telephone interview schedule, as will evidence of user opinions to the contrary, where experience (or lack of it) had contributed to the creation of less favourable perceptions of staff. By considering customer care and its related implications, the high expectations that were evident about staff will be discussed as further illustration of the unique relationship that exists for many users with their library staff. In this respect the social function that library staff fulfil will be explored.

Staff are pivotal to many of the current quality strategies being embraced by the public library service. As they have been used to discuss the implications of the

increasing role of I.T in the service, the SERVQUAL dimensions will be used as a framework to discuss staff in a service quality context.

Finally the chapter will consider the practical implications of the evidence gathered about library staff in terms of how the unique relationship formed between them as service providers and library users can be built upon for successful management of the service. This is particularly important for the service in the context of change and confusion that has been identified. The chapter will conclude with a detailed summary.

“The Professionals” – Library Staff on Themselves

Professionalism

An overwhelming sense that emerged from focus group discussions with library staffs, of mixed grade, was the level of professionalism exhibited and talked about. At all levels the approach to the service that they provide was professional, as was clearly illustrated by the dynamics of the focus groups conducted with mixed membership. It became evident that the lines between professional and paraprofessional staff are being blurred, largely due to the changes in the public sector, as *Line (1991:101)* predicted:

“In libraries the dividing lines between ‘professional’ and non-professional’ will disappear they will simply not be relevant.”

Lack of resources means that increasingly paraprofessional staff perform aspects of the service more traditionally associated with the professional, such as enquiry work. Evidence of increased paraprofessional responsibility across a variety of roles from marketing services to stock selection was observed. One staff member commented:

“The expectations are not just the borrower’s expectation but our expectation, that having been given this query, we don’t want to be beaten and we will do everything that we can for our own satisfaction or professionalism to find the answer.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Another respondent, a paraprofessional member of staff, simply stated:

“We are all professionals.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

As the service recognises the value of various quality management systems and standards, staff strengths are more appropriately exploited for the good of the library irrespective of grade and qualifications.

The level of commitment and enthusiasm from paraprofessional staff participating in the research mirrored that of their professional colleagues and apart from minor discrepancies in terms of knowledge of management policy, these staff were indistinguishable in their attitude from their professional colleagues. The only major difference identified between staff levels was that the paraprofessional perspective was oriented around front-line service provision where as professionals gravitated towards a management and policy view. For the most part, the opinions noted were similar with no greater variance occurring in opinion and perception of the service between different staff grades than naturally occurred between different staff of the same level.

Accompanying this professionalism was evidence of a great deal of pride in the service provided, with comments including:

“I think within the resources that are available to us now, we are doing an excellent job, I really do.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

Despite consistency between levels of staff in their commitment to the service and the overall perceptions that they hold of the service, the research noted some level of conflict in some, but not all, of the focus groups between professional and non-professional staff. This can be attributed to the different perspectives of

these different levels of staff as outlined above, and were characterised by conflicting perceptions of each other, and unlike the *ASLIB* research finding not of the service itself. For example, some paraprofessional staff indicated that they felt that they lacked the support of their professional colleagues in delivering frontline services, feeling that their ideas are sometimes overlooked. One respondent stated:

*"They should be listening to you because you know what the punters want, putting it very bluntly."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)*

The literature suggests that this is a tendency rooted in the tradition of hierarchical library management structures. *Kovel-Jarboe (1996: 610)* states:

"In some ways, the largest gap between the principles of quality and the library, may come in the aspect of employee involvement in decision making. Libraries have relied on comprehensive policies and standardized procedure to eliminate the need for individual decisions."

Similarly the research found some managers felt that they did not have the support of the staff in implementing policy:

*"If you get staff who aren't on board with current ideas and current thinking if you like. I mean the main perception of the service that's acquired by the public is on a one-to-one basis with staff in your local library, so if you have a member of staff, who for one reason or another might not agree with something and say 'well I'm not doing that!' . . . then that interaction is counterproductive isn't it?"
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)*

This conflict was characterised by the language of "them and us" that is usually reserved for discussing the relationship between the library and its users. According to the literature on organizations (for example *Kakabadse et al., 1988* and *Handy, 1993*) this language would be indicative of a lack of top down and bottom up communication. However, it should be noted that indications of conflict between levels of staff were limited, which is good news for the service when the implications of such conflicts are considered. As *Millson-Martula and Menon (1995: 46)* warn:

“Library staff will not demonstrate a high degree of commitment and caring unless they believe that library management cares about the staff as well.”

Despite some undercurrents indicating a lack of understanding between the groups, the overwhelming finding was of respect between and for different levels of staff and the difficult jobs that each do in providing a high quality service to the public whilst managing ever-diminishing resources.

Though this research has considered the conflict arising between different levels of staff, this is not representative of user perceptions of library staff. This research found that, consistent with previous studies, the majority of users have no concept of the distinctions between library staff that the service itself makes. For example *Prins and de Geir (1995: 21)* note that:

“To the average user, the librarian is virtually indistinguishable from other library staff.”

A participating member of staff also suggested that:

“We’ve got this sort of dual edge. People think that everybody who works in the library is a librarian. I mean people will come for library assistants’ jobs and put librarian on their application. They think the staff stamp books out all day, but, they think they’re incredibly intellectual. They even sometimes apologise for reading “rubbish” and half the time you read exactly the same “rubbish”!
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

For the majority of users library staff are librarians and they presented the research with little evidence to suggest that they have any understanding of the different roles staff perform. For the most part the only distinctions made are in terms of the fact that they might see one member of staff on the enquiry desk and one member of staff on the counter. Similarly there is little evidence of any concept of the type of qualifications needed to fulfil a professional role. Users are not concerned with how well qualified their staff are, only that they fulfil their desired role, and this will be considered in detail in due course during the section considering users’ perceptions of staff. Perhaps it is as well that for the

majority of library users staff are quite simply library staff as potentially this traditionally divided image of library staff creates further elements of perceptual confusion to further complicate the multi-faceted image that the service is trying to manage.

While for the most part the levels of professionalism noted by the research from all staff can be regarded as positive, the quality management literature does unearth a potential problem. In terms of quality initiatives, such professionalism, it is suggested, has the potential to form a barrier to service quality. *St Clair (1997: xvii)* argues that professionals facing a quality initiative, are:

"Mystified by, if not fearful of, the consequences of what they think could mean turning over their services and practices, which are based on tradition, standards and respected bodies of knowledge, to the uninformed whims of customers."

Again it needs to be emphasised that this was not the experience of the research. Staff participating did create a professional air, but with this came pride in what they perceive as a high quality public service, responding from within its constraints to its customers and committed to customer care. Comments included:

"I don't know whether we try and go the extra mile because people expect us to or whether they expect us to go the extra mile because we always have in the past."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

In a similar vein, when describing the type of people working for the public library service, words such as committed and enthusiastic were employed universally by the groups. As one group discussed:

"I think we're all in libraries because of us, because of our natures."

Another respondent added:

"I think we're all fairly committed as well."

And another observed:

*"I think the majority of staff here are."
From Focus Group Discussion (Authority B)*

Training

Although the issues of training have been considered by previous chapters in relation to information technology and customer care, it is worthy of further mention in the context of the people upon whom its impact is greatest, library staff and library users. Training is identified by the management literature (For example *Jordan and Jones, 1995*) as being vital for the maintenance of staff morale particularly during periods of change and upheaval within an organisation. The quality literature also illustrates the implications of staff training as being vital for the delivery of a quality service. *Holt (1996: 559)* notes that:

"It will take a trained staff to help public libraries create the essential services and products which will win and hold the support of library constituents."

Similarly, *Morgan and Murgatroyd (1994: 44)* suggest that:

"Quality in services is about the increasing of variance and the skill repertoires of staff so that they may more appropriately meet wide variations in demand."

The research found that where training of staff was undertaken in the participant authorities, library staff themselves felt that it was inadequate (as chapter 4 has discussed) and somewhat haphazard in allocation. A common theme was of one staff member attending a training course and then sharing the information gained from that training with colleagues. Again it is supposed that such evidence is indicative of the financial pressures service providers currently find themselves under. Staff noted that a lack of training could lead to a lack of confidence:

*"If you deal with the public on the front-line, it can be very difficult at times if you haven't had the training to deal with it."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)*

This is something that the literature also warns of, particularly in terms of the potential implications for the perceptions and expectations that are created of the service. Hébert (1994: 18) emphasises this in terms of the implications for managing a service failure:

“Training front line staff to understand the types of actions that they should undertake to create satisfaction, mitigate dissatisfaction, and to foster external rather than internal blame for the failure, will enhance quality evaluation of the library service.”

Hébert goes on to describe the role of front-line staff as “pivotal”. Given this, it is essential that these staff are in a position to feel confident in performing their day-to-day roles and are given the necessary training to allow them to succeed in this, as Line (1991: 103) notes:

“Since technology and the information environment generally will not stand still, training must be a continual process.”

Without the appropriate training staff will find it very difficult to create the right first impressions which this research has widely discussed as being vital to the perceptions that are ultimately created of the library service.

Morale and Motivation

Impacted upon by training and relationships between management and staff, as discussed above, morale and motivation of library staff are crucial to the types of perceptions and thus ultimately expectations that library users take away of a service point. If staff are not motivated and committed then the image of the service is bound to suffer. If staff are not happy and fulfilled in their role it is hard for them to be motivated. The research found some evidence of motivation and morale issues among library staff consistent with previous research. ASLIB (1995:133) observe that:

“Some contributors expressed their worries about the morale of those who work in public libraries, and about the damage to services – concerns that should presumably have an effect on users’ observations and expectations and non-user perceptions.”

These are considered indicative of the changes occurring in society discussed by previous chapters, where higher consumer expectations clash with a beleaguered public sector. This results in morale issues as staff feel that such pressures stretch them to and beyond breaking point. The following comment is typical of the feelings expressed about this particular problem:

“Well we’re constantly required to be elastic in terms of what we provide but we’re not elastic in our ability to provide it.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The impact of these changes on staff motivation has also been noted by the literature. *Line (1991: 98)* considers the inertia within the service as a problem:

“The lack of movement means that both staff as individuals and the library as an organization are starved of stimulus.”

The research found this to be something that staff themselves consider to be a problem as the potential for promotion and career advancement is limited within authorities and also somewhat restricted at a national level. One respondent commented on this in detail:

“I think it’s fair to say that professional posts throughout the country have, not exactly dried up, but certainly I think have become a lot less accessible, or are coming up far less frequently than they used to. Therefore, you’ve got even your professional staff that have been here for quite a long time Okay maybe we’re moving from one job to another within the same authority, I think most of the people around the table have done that sort of thing, but you’re not moving authorities so there’s no ‘fresh blood’ in that way. If you’re married with a family, you can’t just nip off and take this wonderful looking contract for 6 months, because that’s what they are now. You just cannot do it. There’s very, very few full-time professional posts to move onto from the level that we are at now.”
Comment from Focus group (Authority B)

Given this perceived nation-wide lack of potential for professional development, it is understandable that the challenges of trying to manage rising expectations within shrinking budgets impacts on staff morale at all levels. Knowledge among professional staff of the potential for the service being limited by

financial restraints was presented by *ASLIB (1995:136)* to account for the mismatches in opinion their research identified:

“ . . . We believe that the divergence of expectation between professionals and others who work in libraries, and between professional librarians and users, arise because professional librarians have their own view of the service that public libraries should provide.”

As a study based on this *ASLIB* research it is interesting to note that this study found little evidence of a mismatch of opinion between professional and non-professional staff in this respect. Perceptions of the service and the directions it should be taking were found to be consistent between the two levels of staff participating, although some variance existed in opinions of how the library should get there. As already noted, difference of opinion between the professional and non-professional staff identified by this study were in respect of management issues rather than an overall perception of and expectations for the service.

“Them and us”

Another consistency, indicated by the research between staff of all grades, was the tendency to regard library users as “them”! Whilst committed to providing users with high standards of service, it became clear that users exasperate library staff to a certain extent. As such, user behaviour results in library staff forming negative perceptions of service users. One respondent stated:

“I just find it so frustrating that we put 100 per cent into what we're doing and you just can't please people, I just find that some people I think will just moan for the sake of moaning!”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

This respondent was by no means alone, another commented:

“It is strange though, that even when we do provide what is obviously popular, by and large it's not universally well received. We're always fighting a rear guard action against those who would put us back twenty years or so.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The frustration caused by these perceived ungrateful and inconsistent service users was noted across all of the focus groups, providing further indication of the management problems that a changing consumer society creates. At the root of this frustration amongst staff appeared to be the problems created by trying to serve such wide and varying expectations of the service, returning once more to the essential dilemma discussed by previous chapters, of the public library service trying to be “all things to all people”. One respondent summarised this by resorting to a well-worn cliché:

*“You can’t please all of the people all of the time and all that stuff!”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)*

Although there may be good reason for the frustration that service staff feel towards users, it still presents potential management problems, particularly if frustration manifests itself in other behaviours being exhibited towards service users. The relationship between staff and user is essential to the perceptual process and crucial to any assessments that a user makes of service quality, as the literature notes. *Domas White and Abels (1995: 37)* describe services as being:

“Dependent on the interaction between client and service provider . . .”

Similarly *Bitner (1990: 70)* observes that:

“Because services are essentially intangible processes – customers are frequently searching for surrogates or “cues” to help them determine the firms capabilities. Often the only cues available are the firm’s physical facility and its employees.”

Furthermore, *Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 20)* stress the importance of responding to the individual customer:

“The employees delivering the service frequently are the service in the customer’s eyes, and people may differ in their performance from day to day or even hour to hour. Heterogeneity also results because no two customers are precisely alike, each will have unique demands or experience the service in a unique way.”

Given that this is the root cause of frustration for many staff, the inability to please everybody that uses the service despite best efforts to do so, management for service quality is made all the more difficult. However, it should be noted that alongside this frustration sits the frustration from staff that some of their users do not expect enough from the service. Comments included:

“I think 90 per cent of people who come into libraries know what to expect and are probably surprised that we provide the extra services as well, things like video and audio and that.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

And:

“I think a lot of people haven’t come to terms with the fact that we’re a multi-media activity. They don’t expect to find things like faxes or photocopiers even.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

However, this is a two-way relationship and the perceptions that library users have of library staff are as equally complex and confusing as those that staff exhibit about themselves.

“The Personal Touch” – Library Users on Library Staff

Ownership

When talking about library staff the language adopted by users is characterised by ownership. Users, as has been mentioned by chapter 5, refer to the library service and its staff as being their own. This is something that library staff revealed that they are well aware of. Comments from focus group discussions included:

“They do refer to it as: ‘I do love coming to MY library’ – it’s personal.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Another respondent observed that:

*"I think a lot of library staff are cherished by certain users."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)*

And one staff member said that a user on breaking up a fight between two other users in the library had announced:

*"Not in MY library!"
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)*

This is a factor that previous research has also noted. *Proctor (1999: 4)* observes that:

"The research [Proctor et al. 1998] showed that the relationship between staff and readers and the quality of library 'experience' was as important to users as the resources the library provided."

Similarly, this research noted that when users were presented with the statement: *"the quality of a public library is directly related to the amount of funding that it receives"*, across the Likert responses given, 37.5 per cent of respondents referred to the importance of library staff to the library's quality. Comments in this respect included:

*"I also think the quality of the library depends on the people that are working there and whether they are the type of people who are approachable, and will help you with information and that will help you and are generally willing to serve. I think if you've got people there who are arrogant and won't help you then you'll tend not to bother going."
Respondent Comment (Authority A)*

Another respondent observed:

*"I think the quality obviously goes with the amount of money, but also, the staff can give a quality service, even if they're not given the full funding."
Respondent Comment (Authority B)*

And:

It could be a very well stocked library, but if the staff weren't happy and pleasant I think that would have an affect. I think perhaps that a library that didn't have good books but had a friendly helpful staff would do just as well, if not better."

Respondent Comment (Authority C)

These comments are consistent with the findings from previous research.

Quoting their 1985 research, *Parasuraman et al. (1988: 16)* noted that:

"Respondents gave several illustrations of instances when they were satisfied with a specific service but did not feel that the service firm was of high quality."

Certainly the research gathered abundant qualitative data to support the emphasis that users place on their relationship with staff. Staff were almost universally talked about by users with very high regard, one respondent described them as *"the backbone of the library"*. When respondents were presented with the statement: *"I do not like to ask library staff for help, because I don't think that they will be able to help me"*, 90 per cent of participants, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. This pattern of response was evenly distributed across the participant authorities. Respondents were very quick and eager to support their disagreement with the statement with anecdotal evidence. One respondent commented:

"I strongly disagree, because they are trained professionals and in my experience they are usually able to provide answers to my questions."

Respondent Comment (Authority A)

Another stated:

"They're very good here . . . and if they haven't got it they will usually go out of their way to find out for you."

Respondent Comment Authority C

Similarly another respondent was full of praise:

"I find them the most helpful people around, so I'd strongly disagree. Whatever I ask for they do their utmost. I've never had a problem. They'll ring around for you and if they haven't got it they're most apologetic and they will put you on the right lines to find it."
Respondent Comment (Authority B)

These comments are just examples of the many similar words of praise that respondents gave of staff. It would appear from this evidence that the pride that staff illustrated they have in the service is rewarded by satisfied and happy users, although as staff themselves pointed out, users are not always so directly forthcoming in their praise:

"People don't praise. They'll jump in to complain but they are very slow to praise."
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Perhaps this is reflective of the changes in society where library users now expect high standards of customer care and service and as such do not vocalise their praise despite being satisfied with the service that they receive.

The research also observed that where users were not so happy with their experience of library staff they were very reluctant to criticise staff. Of the 10 per cent of users who did not disagree or strongly disagree with the statement on library staffs' ability to help them, 7.5 per cent chose a non-committal neither agree or disagree response. However, further probing revealed that these respondents were not happy with library staff commenting that, in their experience, they are *"unapproachable"* or *"not as good as they should be"*. This is reflective of the previously noted fact that users generally, traditionally have not liked to criticise the public library service, for fear of losing it. Similarly it is also indicative of the sympathy that users expressed towards library staff due to their wider perceptions of the public sector generally.

Despite the praise and high regard that the research identified from users towards library staff, the research noted a more divided opinion in terms of their perceived importance to the service. 55 per cent of respondents rated staff as the library's most important resource, agreeing or strongly agreeing with the

statement: *"the most important thing about the public library service is its staff."* In support of this response statements universally praised the role that library staff play in the service experience. For example, one respondent commented:

"If the staff weren't there you wouldn't have a library!"
Respondent Comment (Authority B)

However, 32.5 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement and 12 per cent neither agreed or disagreed. These respondents illustrated that they valued library staff but that other resources were more important in their library experience. Comments included:

"I think it's the contents of the library, the materials that are there, for me, I think that in the end if the things are on the shelves and available to me I could access them."
Respondent Comment (Authority A)

And:

"I think the most important thing is having all the books there and having up-to-date books and keeping them up-to-date, not the staff."
Respondent Comment (Authority C)

Interestingly, the research fieldwork indicated a division of opinion between users in different authorities where this statement was concerned. Of the 32.5 per cent of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that, library staff are the most important thing about the public library service, over half, 53.8 per cent were Authority A respondents. This division of opinion can perhaps be attributed to the fact that this authority had experienced recent library closures making respondents astutely aware of other issues, particularly funding, presently impacting upon the service.

Customer care and beyond

The emphasis that service users place on customer care has been widely discussed by this research, as it has indicated that library users, whether they label themselves as such or not, are increasingly exhibiting customer behaviour reflecting their experiences of other services. Given that library staff are primary

providers of the service, the relationships they build with their users become increasingly important as they have the opportunity to make the difference between the formation of a positive and a negative service perception. As *Bitner (1990: 79)* suggests:

"It is important to manage and control every individual service encounter to enhance overall perceptions of service quality."

Similarly *Seay et al. (1996:483)* state that:

"Libraries have been slow to recognize that a reputation for quality is built on the perception that library patrons have about library staff as well as the service itself."

The emphasis that some users placed upon the relationship they have with *their* library staff suggests that users actively seek, and definitely value the personal touch that they get from the service:

"When you go to the library on a regular basis, you build up a rapport with the people in there. It's about personalities; they do make a difference in a library. That's why I enjoy visiting my local branch. They know me and I know them and it's pleasant to go."
Respondent Comment (Authority B)

On being asked what she would rather be labelled by the library service, for example, a user, borrower, reader, customer, one respondent commented:

"Well you get to know the library staff, it's first name terms really."
Respondent Comment (Authority C)

Another user expressed a similar experience:

"Our library staff are really friendly, they'll just call you by your name, you know Mrs 'whatever'."
Respondent Comment (Authority B)

Consistent with previous research (for example, *Proctor et al., 1998*) and staff perceptions, this research identified that for some users library staff fulfil a social role. Often when talking about staff words such as "friendly" and

“approachable” were employed illustrating the type of attitude users expect to find from staff. There was an expectation, particularly among branch library users that staff will have time to talk, as one focus group respondent illustrated:

“I think this was one of the problems that happened in the branch libraries when the staffing was cut . . . staff were saying, we haven’t got time to talk to people anymore.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

The research also identified, particularly among some of the older service users, a concern that a changing society, particularly technology, would impact on the role that staff play in service provision. For example one respondent commented:

“I don’t think I could manage without the staff, you could have as many computers as you like, you still need the staff, I’m sure you do.”

Respondent Comment (Authority B)

The personal nature of the library service experience is widely noted by the literature and although referring to a special library context, the following comment from *Domas White and Abels (1995: 41)* translates seamlessly to a public library setting:

“The services themselves are highly customized and staff exercise considerable judgement in meeting individual needs.”

In 1976, *Totterdell and Bird (1976: 93)* found that:

“Users did not like to ask staff for help but not always or necessarily because they felt that staff were unapproachable – very often it was because they really did not think that staff could help them.”

In contrast to this finding, this research found evidence that users in 1999 have high expectations of library staff in terms of their knowledge, their attitude and their time. As one respondent commented:

"Well I am always amazed at the knowledge, the breadth and depth of the knowledge that librarians of any type have. They seem to be in Librarianship because they love it and they know everything that it is possible to know about it. If they can't answer all my questions then they can certainly find out how they can answer."

Respondent Comment (Authority A)

This reflects library staffs' expectations of themselves, particularly as information providers. A respondent in one of the focus groups illustrated this:

"They will always come to us because they know that we will put that little bit of time in for them, we will always try that little bit harder."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

However, as with all perceptions of the public library service, expectations were divided and there were those users who felt that library staff could not fulfil such high expectations of them. It should be noted that these respondents were firmly in the minority. The argument presented by the following quote, could be regarded as slightly more realistic in the current public library climate:

"I do perceive librarians as not being able to help a great deal on a huge range of topics. I mean they have to scatter their skills very thinly over a very large range of things that people might come in and ask."

Respondent Comment (Authority A)

Yet this user did confess that she tended not to seek help from her library staff perceiving that they would not be able to answer her particular enquiry. Those users expressing high expectations of library staff largely based them on personal experience. As such it becomes increasingly evident the role that library staff have to play in the creation of a favourable, high quality image of the service. This role is seen by the services marketing literature as an opportunity. In the following quote from *Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 122)* "small service firms" could just as easily read "branch library":

"Personnel at small service firms often know customers by name and build relationships that reflect their personal knowledge of customer requirements and preferences."

As they play such an important role in the library service experience, it is important that library staff do not become complacent. As has been noted by previous chapters, one bad service experience can influence perceptions in such a way as to eliminate a history of good service experiences, as *Hébert (1994: 17)* warns:

“The halo that surrounds the public library provides a well of goodwill that the library can draw from to compensate for occasional service failures. But the well is not bottomless.”

Staff Role: Implications for Service Quality

When any number of quality systems are considered: TQM, SERVQUAL, ISO9000, Investors in People, Business Excellence, staff involvement and commitment is essential in ensuring their success. *Holt (1996: 546)* observes that:

“Completeness of effort throughout the entire organization is the best strategy to achieve quality.”

Similarly *Millson-Martula and Menon (1995: 46)* state that:

“No effort to enhance customer satisfaction will succeed unless customers are convinced that library staff, as service providers, care about the quality of service they provide and the manner in which they do it.”

As it provides five clear dimensions for service quality and focuses essentially on user expectations and perceptions, staff role will be considered against the SERVQUAL model. By examining the impact that staff role has in each dimension (reliability; responsiveness; assurance; empathy; tangibles) alongside the data generated by the research fieldwork this section aims to highlight the potential that staff have in creating and managing the perceptions and expectations that users have of the public library service.

Reliability – “Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately”
Parasuraman et al. (1988: 23)

In terms of perceptions of service quality, previous research illustrates that; service users regard reliability as the most important dimension. *Parasuraman et al. (1988: 31)* state that:

“A striking result in terms of the relative importance of the five dimensions in predicting overall quality is that reliability is consistently the most critical dimension”

In a public library service environment reliability encompasses factors such as the accuracy of information, the library’s ability to provide the user with the item they require, whether the library is open when a user wants to access it. Also the systems and procedures in place such as issues, reservations, catalogues, complaints and the results that they yield, would all fall into the reliability dimension. It becomes clear that in terms of service reliability staff play an important role, as they are the direct providers of many of these factors. Of particular importance is their ability to provide accurate information on request via the most appropriate method to do so. To ensure that this can be achieved staff of all levels need to be trained in the appropriate tools available to them, and as has already been noted lack of training was found to be a point of concern for staff, particularly in terms of I.T.

Library staff were concerned that cuts to the service would compromise their ability to perform reliably. One respondent noted that:

“A lot of the staff I think feel themselves spread very thinly and therefore not able to give a proper service.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

This returns to the problem of the service trying to be all things to all people all of the time. A service attempting to perform a task verging on the impossible is not going to be able to ensure quality service. When staff are over-stretched and too busy, they will not be able to give full attention to an enquiry, which might compromise the service transaction in the reliability dimension. Similarly when

there is a queue at the counter, the phone is ringing and the library is short staffed, service encounters are unlikely to perform well in the reliability dimension, as one respondent observed:

“I have to say that when you are working in a library on a Saturday morning you are not quite sure what your priorities are. Do I go and put the toner in the photocopier? Do I go and sort out the print jam on the CD-ROM? Do I issue this book or go and find that video?”
Respondent Comment (Authority C)

This emphasises an essential problem. In the ideal world of service quality, there would be enough staff to perform all of these tasks and more, to give the attention that individual users require, to ensure service procedure and to create a positive perception of service quality in all of the SERVQUAL dimensions, never mind reliability. In reality, the purse strings are tight, the service countrywide is under funded and staff are juggling an increasing number of services and hoping that they don't drop any of the “balls”.

Responsiveness – “Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service”
Parasuraman et al. (1988: 23)

Evidently, an over-stretched service will also be compromised in the responsiveness dimension of the service particularly in a public library service setting where the service transaction requires a high level of input from staff. As *Parasuraman et al. (1985: 42)* state:

“Quality in service is not engineered at the manufacturing plant, then delivered intact to the customer. In labour intensive services, for example, quality occurs during service delivery, usually in an interaction between the client and the contact person from the service firm.”

Even the simple transactions performed in a library, such as the issue and return of books, require interaction between user and staff and therefore, in a library, staff have major influence over the perceptions of the service that the users creates in the responsiveness dimension. As *Hébert (1994: 17)* observes:

“Responsiveness refers to a library’s willingness to help customers and provide prompt service and is related to the functional service dimension, which includes attitude and service mindedness of staff and the ability of the library to maintain contact with customers during service transaction.”

In terms of the availability of staff few users expressed concern about the staffing levels in the libraries that they used. Where staffing levels were seen to be inadequate, users indicated that queuing times were considered acceptable and further illustrated their sympathy towards the funding issues the service deals with. Comments included:

“Sometimes you do have to wait a few minutes, but that’s no big deal.”
Respondent Comment (Authority A)

And:

“Yes, there are less staff than ever there were and you know the waiting is sometimes longer. I am accustomed to it, it is a change that has taken place over a long time, it’s part of my life so I don’t find it over irksome.”
Respondent Comment (Authority A)

Another stated:

“I mean you might well have to wait but that’s fine . . . If there’s 10 people in front of you then obviously you’re going to wait, but you’re not going to wait for very long.”
Respondent Comment (Authority C)

The research also found very little evidence from users that they had encountered any problems in terms of staff willingness to help. As already noted, the overwhelming theme from users was the high regard they have not only for library staff but also for the relationship that they have with them. However, illustrating a less favourable perception one respondent made the following comment about her experience of library staffs’ willingness to help:

"I have come across continual reluctance to really get down to the 'nitty-gritty' and help. It's almost a lazy attitude of 'Oh yes history books are over there – you'll find what you need – plod through.' I do not find that at all helpful."

Respondent Comment (Authority C)

It is interesting to note that this user reported that she is no longer a public library service user.

On the other side of this, staff indicated that in some respects they felt that users were no longer prepared to find things out for themselves. They reported that they had experienced a change in attitude, indicative of a consumer society, where users were expecting an increased level of staff involvement in their library experience. The following quote illustrates this, but also highlights the general willingness to help users that the research identified amongst staff:

"I usually show them in the hope that next time they'll know but some people really just don't want to do it themselves, but then we don't really mind obliging do we?"

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

One user group amongst which this attitude was noted to be of particular concern, across all three participant authorities, was school children using the service for homework resources.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the public library service in terms of the quality perceptions that are created of it, is the fact that the pace of technology combined with diminishing resource makes it hard for the service to maintain its responsiveness in terms of the new services that it offers. However, consistent with evidence from previous user studies from *Totterdell and Bird, 1976* to *Proctor et al. 1998*, this research has identified the services' potential to excel in the responsiveness dimension. The relationship between staff and users, the commitment exhibited by library staff towards the service and the willingness of library staff to be responsive wherever possible to their customers have the potential to create perceptions of a high quality customer focused service. However, the relationship between users and staff is also one which can be built upon in order to manage the perceptions of service areas, such as I.T. where full

potential, for whatever reason cannot be realised. This will be discussed in further detail in the final section of this chapter.

Assurance – “*Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence*”
Parasuraman et al. (1988: 23)

As the above quote from the originators of the SERVQUAL model illustrates this is one dimension of service quality where the role that staff play is imperative to the quality perceptions that are formed of a service. Evidently the issues of staff training that this chapter has already considered play an important part in ensuring that service quality is maintained in this dimension. Where staff are not confident in their own abilities they will struggle to inspire confidence among service users.

Similarly, with the increased role of information technology in service delivery, library staff expressed concern that they were not providing a quality service because they lacked confidence in their own abilities. One respondent admitted:

“You tend not to use other avenues to take your reader or user, because you are not sure how to use the piece of equipment or that book you’ve perhaps never seen before. So their perceptions then may be that the staff aren’t trained very well, but it’s just that you’re not confident in using the materials sometimes.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

However, as has been noted, the research found users to have generally high opinions of library staff, and experience to the contrary, which confirmed the ability of staff to perform the service these users wanted. This was not only noted by users in the comments that they made about staff, but was something that focus group discussions revealed staff to be aware of:

“I think they genuinely expect you to have the answer to every query no matter what it is.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The research found very little evidence amongst users of dissatisfaction with library staff, suggesting that in this dimension staff are creating favourable

perceptions of the service in the three participant authorities. It was in fact interesting to observe that library staff were more critical of themselves, than users were of them. Staff also noted the relationships that certain users would form with certain staff members, and that certain members of staff were trusted over and above others. As one respondent commented:

“Certainly the users that we have in the reference library approach certain members of staff, because it’s been said to me: ‘I would not like going to that person’.”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Another stated:

“They have their favourites. I have known them swap queues!”

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

The fact that staff have noticed certain users will approach certain staff members also has implications for perceptions of service quality in the empathy dimension.

Empathy – “Caring, individualized attention the firm provides to its customers”

Parasuraman et al. (1988: 23)

The literature notes empathy as a traditional strength of the library profession.

St. Clair (1997: 89) observes that:

“Empathy has long been a characteristic of good librarianship, and it is expected in other information delivery operations as well. Librarians are known for having strong ‘people skills’, and their reputation for empathy and caring for each individual user and his or her needs is a long and admirable one.”

It is in this dimension that library staff really can make a difference, anyone who has ever worked with the public knows that even something as simple as a smile can make a difference:

“Much of what customers see as special needs or requests may actually be rather routine from the employees point of view, what is important is that the customer perceives that something special is being done for her based on her own individual needs.”
Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 109)

The research found that staff do make that difference. One respondent drew on a positive experience from the past to illustrate her current perceptions of library staff:

“I’ve had so much help as a student, I know that’s going back a bit, but as a student I got so much help and even encouragement from the staff.”
Respondent Comment (Authority C)

Another respondent indicated that his perception of the service was based entirely on his relationship with library staff:

“Your library exists as a person, or at least it does to me. The fact that there are stacks of books there is not why I go. It’s because there are staff there who point me in the right direction. In a sense the books are secondary to the way you look at the service and you actually deal with people and if they’re friendly and helpful, fine, if they’re not you’re put right off.”
Respondent Comment (Authority A)

“Friendly” was a word often used to describe library staff, as were “helpful” and “approachable”, which would suggest that library staff are performing well in the participant authorities in terms of the perceptions that they create in the empathy dimension, as *Millson-Martula and Menon (1995: 36)* observe:

“Customers desire a quality or accurate product or service provided in a friendly and courteous way.”

Users often also described the characteristics they perceive library staff should have most frequently quoting patience, understanding and enthusiasm. For most users a good knowledge of the books and authors was also important. As one respondent put it:

“You do want to talk to somebody who knows about books and who's interested in books themselves, rather than somebody who just wants to gossip and tell you the latest thing that's happened in the village.”
Respondent Comment (Authority B)

The dimension also has particular significance for a public library setting where the service is fulfilling a social and community function. The focus group discussions revealed that the unique community focus of a public library creates another level to the empathy dimension where staff give attention to the needs of the community as a whole as well as to their individual service users. Examples of how this manifested, ranged from issues concerning specific opening hours to respond to specific community needs, to an example where, in one authority library staff had got involved in a drugs outreach programme to help combat a particular problem their community had been experiencing:

“We had a drug problem and I got involved with the outreach workers. We had meetings in the library, they came three nights a week for about five weeks.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

Tangibles – “Physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel”
Parasuraman et al. (1988: 23)

On first inspection the role of staff in this dimension of service quality could be regarded as somewhat secondary, particularly when the apparent impact or potential impact they have on the other dimensions is considered. However, the problems facing the service in terms of funding have been widely discussed. With this come the problems of maintaining the tangible representations of the service. For many libraries keeping up-to-date with I.T is the least of their worries when their book stock is old and rapidly ageing. Previous chapters have already noted that for many service users the role of the library is still rooted firmly in its traditional book based services, as such the appearance of and age of this stock will impact heavily on users' perceptions of service quality in this dimension. As one respondent commented:

"If you've got attractive books around it certainly makes you want to go back, whereas if they are well thumbed and dirty you don't feel like going back at all."

Respondent Comment (Authority B)

Focus group discussion revealed this is a matter with which staff are also concerned:

"Our readers still expect new fiction . . . I think they have got quite high expectations of us for popular fiction."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Similarly, the research indicated that staff are concerned about the tangible representation of their library buildings themselves. Trying to promote a modern service ready to serve the community's recreational and information needs into the millennium, housed within an old and 'aesthetically challenged' building is problematic. One respondent noted:

"Our physical premises are on the low side of recommended standards anyway."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Another member of staff commented:

"I think the fact is, the actual fabric of the building lets us down really. This one obviously looks very good from the front, look at it from the outside and you would imagine that inside here there is a quality service going on. But some of our buildings were built maybe a hundred years ago and look so thoroughly uninviting from the outside, yet what you probably find is actually something quite different."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority A)

The physical representation of the library was also found to be very important to some users. One respondent commented:

"I think when they are nice substantial brick buildings, you know ours was in a hut before which was very distasteful to look at and you almost didn't want to go in there. So I think the building is very important."

Respondent Comment (Authority B)

Another respondent stated:

“I think the main thing is having the building that people can actually go to.”

Respondent Comment (Authority B)

Given the importance that users place on such tangible representations of service quality, and the challenges that face many services in this respect, the role that staff have to play in this dimension becomes increasingly important. Library staff provide the service with the opportunity to raise quality perceptions that are created in the tangible dimension, to compensate for the failings of other tangible representations of the service. Staff that are well presented and appear to be happy and approachable will go a long way to creating a positive service perception. However, perhaps it is not quite that simple for the library service. Chapter 3 has already discussed in detail, the implications of stereotypes for the service and the ease with which a stereotype can be confirmed, as it provides a cognitive anchor for experience and expectations. This considered, creating perceptions of quality in the tangibles dimension may be all the more difficult for the public library service.

Considering the role of staff in terms of the impact that they have on the SERVQUAL dimensions illustrates not only the magnitude with which library staff impact upon the service experience, but also the potential that they have to manage perceptions and expectations that are created of the service, not only in terms of service quality but also library image, promotion and development.

Practical Implications – Perceptions Creators and Expectation Managers

Across all of the thematic discussion chapters it has become clear that library staff play a key role in the creation and management of perceptions and expectations. From the initial “snapshot” that a user takes of the service, through

managing perceptions and expectations through a period of societal and technological change, and dealing with the issues of confusion these create, library staff remain pivotal to the success of a library in performing its many and varied roles. Whether talking to the lonely old aged pensioner, whose weekly library visit is her only trip out, helping a child source homework material or surfing the Internet, library staff are, to many users, the service.

In the relationships that they form with their users staff have the potential to manage the expectations and perceptions of the service that are created on a day-to-day basis. This is something that is not only noted by the literature and by the library staff themselves, but that is also apparent to users:

“The staff make the atmosphere really and they can make it quite an intimidating place or they can make it a nice happy, jovial place.”
Respondent Comment (Authority A)

Analysis against the SERVQUAL dimensions highlights the impact of library staff on all areas of the service, in its nature a public library service transaction is personal. However, as has been considered at length, increasingly libraries are coping with the impossible task of being all things to all people. As such there are an increasing number of perceptions being created and expectations to manage of the service making the importance of staff in the library transaction all the more evident. Quite simply, in trying to satisfy an increasing and dynamic range of expectations library staff are also having to manage failure in service encounters. Given the competing number of expectations there are of service role and the confusion that this creates, increasingly library staff are likely to meet with service users whose expectations have not been met and whose perceptions of the service and its quality will be compromised by such a service experience. However, the literature on service quality suggests that even these service experiences provide the potential to create positive perceptions by managing the expectations that are formed. For example *Hébert (1994: 18)* argues that:

“Proper staff responses can transform a failure . . . into a satisfactory service experience. The ability of staff to make an appropriate response is largely a function of their knowledge and control.”

And Milner (1996: 4) states:

“While the ideal may be to ‘get it right first time’, the evidence suggests that getting it ‘wrong’, if managed properly, can be an opportunity in itself.”

The key is communication, talking to users and taking every opportunity to promote the library service to create positive perceptions of the library service while at the same time ensuring expectations are managed. As Krieg-Sigman (1995: 423) suggests:

“The best communication and promotion is consistent, honest and simple.”

This may mean in some instances explaining to users the limitations of the service. For example, explaining to a student that it is not viable for the public library to stock the specialist texts they require, but that it might be possible to access them through inter-library loans. Or perhaps explaining that the library has to balance its provision of information technology alongside its provision of other sources of information. Often it is necessary to re-educate users as to what they can expect from a service. Similarly this might mean promoting the non-book-based service and the capabilities of the service to raise the historically low expectations of some public library users, as Doherty *et al.* (1995: 450) comment:

“Marketing can help to define how libraries smoothly make the transition from institutions which primarily lend books to ones which provide a far wider range of information services to their customers.”

The literature also suggests that in the management of perceptions and expectations communication needs to be two way. In other words successful perception creation and expectation management is dependent upon the service listening to its customers. Kinnell Evans (1997(a):10) describes this as follows:

“The emphasis is not on what managers perceive their library users and potential users want, but on establishing exactly what is required by users through identification of their needs in line with the objectives of the library service.”

In theory this all sounds straightforward. The key to managing expectations and creating perceptions is communication, and the key to communication is library staff. However, as this research has indicated and discussed through previous chapters, the whole process is complicated by the confusion that exists from both library staff and library users about what the library service is, and what it should be trying to be. Once more the discussion returns to the fact that the public library is trying to be all things to all people. One member of staff encapsulated feelings about this with the following statement:

“You’ve then got this perception of the library service with unlimited funds and unlimited ability.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

Another respondent suggested that library staff need to be:

“Filling the gap between what they [users] think we are and what they expect us to be.”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)

This illustrates that staff are aware of the task in hand, indicating that perhaps the confusion is rooted in the practicalities of where to start on such a huge managerial task. This would be consistent with the reactions received when the focus groups were asked to consider the potential for the management of perceptions and expectations. Initial gasps, nervous chuckles and silences, eventually gave way to serious thought of the issues and tentative suggestions for how this could be achieved. In none of the groups was this question met with confidence.

Surely it is here that senior management have to be clear and concise in their objective, so as staff are aware of the direction that the service is travelling in and why, and thus know the perceptions that they need to create and the expectations

they must seek to manage. The research found that this was something staff would welcome, as often a lack of direction was evident. One respondent summed this feeling up by saying:

*“ We run like mad one way and then, Wham! They change direction!”
Comment from Focus Group (Authority C)*

In their starring role in the “snapshot” process and with the frontline day-to-day contact that they have with library users, public library staff have the potential to create positive perceptions and manage user expectations to ensure realism and subsequently favourable perception creation. Library staff should not therefore, be underestimated or undervalued, especially during times of change when users are seeking direction too. As one member of staff observed:

*“I think we need to make them know what they want.”
Comment from Focus group (Authority C)*

Summary – “Valuing the Library’s Greatest Assets”

This chapter has explored in detail the research findings in relation to the relationship that exists between library staff and library users, a relationship that in the public library is regarded as important for and by both users and staff alike. It became clear to the researcher that library users appear to gain much from the relationships they perceive they have with library staff, a relationship usually characterised by a sense of ownership, loyalty and understanding. However, it also became clear to the researcher that, as the relationship is two-way, staff gain a sense of pride and satisfaction from it. This is important as it has implications for staff morale, and motivation particularly at a time when staff respondents reported that they are also observing a rise in the amount of complaints that they receive.

The research noted that when perceiving themselves, library staff have high expectations of themselves, at all levels, grounded in a sense of professionalism. In contrast to the mismatch between different levels of staff that the *ASLIB*

(1995) research identified, this research noted very similar perceptions and expectations for the future direction of the service and the challenges inherent in pursuing them, among the different levels of staff participating. Where the research did identify a divergence of opinion between professional and paraprofessional staff it was in the potential methods of achieving a common goal, with paraprofessionals focusing on front-end service requirements and professionals adopting a wider managerial perspective, as would be expected.

Supporting the evidence presented in chapter 3 in terms of staff impact on the experience “snapshot” that is formed of the service, the impact of staff on the perceptual process was presented against the SERVQUAL dimensions. This clearly indicated the potential that staff have in influencing library users perceptions and as such subsequently their expectations of service quality. This is summarised by *Kinnell Evans (1997(a): 18)*, who states that:

“In the final analysis, it is the people within library organisations who will be key to the quality of library services in meeting the information service needs of the next century.”

In the knowledge that they have of user behaviour, the contact they have with users of the service and the communication potential that is inherent in this, library staff have the opportunity and potential to promote the service on a day-to-day basis by managing users’ perceptions and expectations. In attempting to ensure that every service experience is positive, they can aim to create consistent and positive perceptions. As has been widely discussed by this research, users respond to customer care and as such even a bad service experience if managed properly can create a favourable perception. Although the service user may have experienced a service failure, if staff are apologetic, helpful and sympathetic the service experience does not have to result in a negative outcome. This is particularly important in a society, as chapter 4 indicated, that places increasing value on customer orientation.

Similarly staff have the potential, through their communication with users to ensure that expectations of the service are kept realistic. This might involve lowering expectations of one aspect of the service, such as information

technology, but also raising expectations of other areas of the service such as community information provision. The research has noted that library users often fragment perceptions of the service resulting in conflicting expectations, and expectation management provides the potential for library staff to address this confusion.

Despite evidence of confusion from both users and staff about the public library services in 1999, users participating in this research were consistent, in an overwhelming majority, in their perceptions of public library staff. Even if users do not always tell staff directly, they are valued and considered essential to the library experience, with most users exhibiting high expectations in terms of the service level they receive from staff.

Chapter 7 – “Conclusions – Harnessing the potential and rising to the challenges”

Introduction

The previous chapters have discussed, in detail, the themes and issues identified from the research. The aim of this chapter is to consider those findings in terms of the grounded theory that they formulate in respect of the importance of the perception and expectation relationship for the public library service.

The research has attempted to examine *how* perceptions and expectations of the public library service in three authorities, formed in 1994, were shaped and influenced and the interaction between them. In this, the study has gone one step further than previous user studies. By looking beyond what expectations and perceptions of the public library service are to how they are formed, the aim has been to gain a greater understanding of the wider implications of users' perceptions and expectations of a service, particularly for effective service management.

In doing this, the services marketing studies, particularly the SERVQUAL model (*Parasuraman et al., 1988*), the Gaps literature (*Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996*) and the psychology literature on perception formation (for example *Hastorf et al., 1970; Augoustinos and Walker, 1995*) have proved of particular use. The potential value of services marketing has also been noted by *Domas White and Abels (1995: 41)* who argue that:

“The services marketing research is conceptually and methodologically rich.”

Similarly *Hernon and Schwarz (1996: 296)* observe that:

“What is exciting about the opportunities presented by the service quality approach is that we can develop research strategies and outcome measures beneficial to library planning and management.”

As such, this chapter will review the findings discussed by the thematic chapters and examine how the public library service can rise to the challenges that they present for the millennium and beyond, by seeking to harness the potential of the perception – expectation relationship for perception creation and expectation management.

The importance of the library experience to the formation of perceptions and the management of expectations will be reviewed, as will the pivotal role of staff in the library experience and the implications of the “snapshot” of experience on the perception – expectation relationship.

The sense of confusion that the research identified will also be reviewed. A sense of confusion was identified among users and staff and has largely been attributed to societal influences, both technological and consumerist. This has created a need for service managers to give greater consideration to the perceptions and expectations of their users in order to perform an increasingly difficult balancing act, in which the cutting edge and the traditional elements of service provision are balanced.

From this review of the research evidence diagrammatic representations of the perception - expectation relationship between user and library, staff and library and user and staff have been designed. These diagrams will be presented and explained to give further understanding of the relationship and its potential use for service management.

This chapter will close by returning to the original *ASLIB (1995)* identified mismatch in expectation between professional staff and service users. The research is summarised via a model for the perception – expectation relationship process in the public library service. The potential applications for perception creation and expectation management for the public library service will also be considered. Finally possible directions for future research will be presented.

Reviewing the Findings

The library experience

As chapter 3 illustrated, the importance of the library experience in the formation of perceptions and expectations of the public library service cannot be underestimated. It is crucial to the image and subsequent promotional strategies adopted that at every experience, the service strives to ensure that the perception the user leaves the service encounter with is and remains favourable. This will enable expectations to be met or exceeded in order to maintain perceived service relevance and need, and thus subsequently encourage repeated service use. This is particularly the case when managing for service quality as *Edwards and Browne (1995: 163)* explain:

“A high quality service is defined as one in which (1) there is perceived congruence between what clients expect and what they receive or (2) perceptions of service quality exceed expectations. A low quality service is one in which perceptions of actual service are lower than expectations.”

Ensuring that public libraries are perceived as high quality is particularly important for a service that faces increased competition from other agencies. As chapter 4 discussed, the changing nature of our society means that there are increasing numbers of agencies competing with the public library as leisure and information providers. This is particularly the case as the number of households with home computers increases. There is increased competition from the telecommunications industries. The costs of telephone calls are falling and the number of free Internet services seems to rise on a daily basis. Increasingly a pattern is emerging to mirror the experience of the United States, and *Kinnell (1995: 265)* observes that:

“Librarians urgently need to meet the competitive threat being posed by new forms of information delivery direct to the end-user. Their professionalism in delivering information services therefore has to be demonstrable through superior quality if they are to compete effectively in this environment.”

Ensuring perceptions of high service quality are created are ever more important to maintain service essentiality among various stakeholding groups, from service users to service funders. As *Carbone (1995: 274)* observes:

“Quality of services and of performance are becoming central notions. Funders and public authorities are obliged to choose priorities in their budgets and librarians are obliged to choose the programmes that best answer the needs of users.”

Chapter 3 considered the importance of the “snapshot” of service experience using text from *Barry Hines’* novel *A Kestrel for a Knave* to illustrate the potential impact of a negative service experience. The fieldwork revealed that the “snapshot” that is created of the library is very emotive and forms a key part in the processing of expectations and perceptions. The impact of the “snapshot” is particularly strong during first and early service experiences when the user has no other experience to base service perceptions on. The research found that users were able to describe in detail first library memories and that perceptions of the service now were often compared with early library experiences. This was particularly the case with older service users whose perceptions of the library have evolved with use.

Furthermore, the research found, consistent with previous research (for example: *Proctor et al., 1998; ASLIB, 1995; Comedia, 1993* and *Kirkup et al., 1989*) that the library experience is very much a holistic one. In other words users use the service for more than just its services, there is also an element of community involvement and a “feel good factor” involved for many service users and, as such, the whole library experience is greater than the sum of its parts. However, the research found that users also fragment the service, the experience may be holistic but it is very much fragmented in terms of perception. It was noted that “snapshots” of the service could change with changes to service use. It was found that they were not exclusive in as much as one user could have multiple perceptions of the same service according to the different facets of the service used and the different members of staff providing the service at the time.

The research also identified that some service users were using different service points, sometimes across more than one authority, to ensure that their particular library needs were met. The most frequent example of this behaviour being the use of a local branch for recreational reading combined with use of a central library for information resources. A finding that the literature supports; *Carbone (1995: 274)* suggests:

“Users are also better able to appreciate services, are more conscious of the strengths and weaknesses of their libraries and perhaps better able to choose the library that is in the best position to meet their expectations.”

This further complicates the issue in terms of managing a library for consistent service quality, particularly as the research also noted that users’ perceptions of service quality differed from staff perceptions of service quality. A service with poor stock but “great staff” was considered more important for some users than a service with “great stock” but poor staff. This is consistent with previous research that highlights the subjectivity of judgements of service quality: *Cronin and Taylor (1992: 56)* state that:

“The managers of service providers need to know how to measure service quality, what aspects of a particular service best define its quality and whether consumers actually purchase from firms that have the highest level of perceived service quality or from those with which they are most satisfied.”

Similarly, *Domas White and Abels (1995: 37)* observe that:

“Service quality is a judgement about the ability of a service to fulfil its task”

A public library fulfils many different tasks for many different people. The research identified this as a problem in terms of the fact that for many users and library staff the need to be “all things to all people” created confusion about service role and direction. This highlights further the practical implications of understanding users’ perceptions and expectations and the impact that the relationship between them has on the service experience. In other words, before library managers can even hope to manage user expectations, they need to have

some knowledge of what they are in order to understand where the service is failing to meet the expectations that exist of it. As Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 76) state:

“Among the aspects of expectations that need to be explored and understood for successful services marketing are the following: What types of expectation standards do customers hold about services? What factors most influence the formation of these expectations? What role do these factors play in changing expectations? How can a service company meet and exceed customer expectations?”

Those expectations that are unrealistic or impractical for the service need to be closely examined and eliminated or revised to avoid service disappointment. This requires dialogue and communication with service users and front-line service providers.

The research found that the greatest source of knowledge about users' expectations came from front-line staff dealing with the requests and enquiries of users on a day to day basis. All of the authorities also had formal communication channels with their users through some form of customer feedback procedure. Authority A also conducted annual customer fora with their service users. In Authority B one professional staff member who was responsible for a nursing library conducted regular customer surveys and dialogue with users. Authority B also reported having conducted a user survey, but to the best of the participating staffs' knowledge, nothing had been done with the data gathered. The research found that there was generally little evidence to suggest that any of the participant authorities monitored customer expectations and perceptions in any formal way such as through a user survey. The literature suggests that surveys can be useful:

“The user survey provided valuable information from our customers which helped the committee develop several recommendations and strategies for improving library services.”
Cundari and Stutz (1995: 190)

The potential of such an exercise was recognised by library staff as the following discussion from one focus group indicates:

"I think we have to manage it by asking our users . . ."

"Finding out what their expectation is."

" . . . What exactly they want."

"And prioritizing."

From Focus Group discussion (Authority B)

The same group also noted the importance of assessing the perceptions and expectations of non-users:

"I actually think we have to go out and ask our non-users, I think that's the harder point."

Comment from Focus Group (Authority B)

However, the way in which such surveys are conducted needs to be carefully considered. *Edwards and Browne (1995: 164)* warn:

"When these user studies are looked at carefully along with the library performance measures which are used to tap user reaction to library services, it becomes clear that although users are asked for their views, it is usually on terms dictated by librarians."

Understanding user perceptions and expectations is particularly important for a service such as the public library, which is subject to stereotypes about image, use and the type of people it employs and who use it. The *ASLIB (1995: 144)* research found that non-users thought:

" . . . that public library users are mainly middle class and that the library has an unchanging image."

Furthermore the *ASLIB (1995: 144)* Review identified that:

"All three groups [frequent; occasional and non-users] agree that the library is not a good place for younger or working class people."

Chapter 3 discussed at length the implications of stereotyping for perception formation and the influence stereotypes can have over expectations in terms of

the cognitive anchors that are created. Stereotypes are usually so strong that when we interact with a person or service we will seek information that confirms the stereotype we expect to find. As *Hinton (1993:70)* notes:

“Unfortunately, studies by Bodenhausen and Wyer (1985) and Macrae and Shepherd (1989) have shown that people do judge individuals as behaving more in character when they behave according to their stereotype than when their behaviour is unrelated to the stereotype of them.”

In library terms the fact that a member of staff wears glasses, may be used by a new service user to reinforce the stereotyped image of a librarian that they expect to find despite the fact that all the other evidence presented by that staff members' appearance refutes the stereotype. In this respect the processing of stereotypes can be closely related to the service satisfaction disconfirmation paradigm, discussed in chapter 1.

The image of the service is something that focus group discussions revealed staff to be very concerned about particularly the image that is presented in terms of the staff as largely middle-aged women. This is of particular relevance when it is considered that the library experience proves so important to service users and that the research found staff make the service experience what it is for many service users. Thus as *Flynn (1993: 155)* observes:

“An important aspect of the fit between the people at the front line and the user is the matching of age, race and gender. While it is not always possible to have services provided by people who match the client, a permanent mismatch will cause disenchantment with the service.”

Chapter 6 detailed the importance of library staff as a whole to the service experience, to users and also to the perceptions and expectations that staff have for themselves. A fierce professionalism was identified that accounted for the high expectations that library staff of all levels have for themselves and the services that they provide. In many cases this leads to frustration where lack of resources pose limitations on the service aspirations of staff.

This professionalism however creates potential barriers to the management of perceptions and expectations particularly in terms of management for service quality. This is due to the perception that new management techniques and practices may threaten the tradition, respect and high standards that library staff are so proud of. Examples of this are widely noted in the literature. For example *Kinnell Evans et al. (1999: 48)* observed a low level of take-up for self-assessment techniques to achieve total quality in public libraries, commenting that:

“Library and information services’ professional and ethical issues need to be addressed.”

The role of library staff is crucial to the perceptions and expectations of the service and in reviewing these findings, one conclusion can be stated with certainty; staff have the potential to create perceptions and manage expectations of the service. They are key to service quality, play a vital role in the library experience and as such they are valued by users as the evidence presented by chapter 6 clearly illustrates.

Given this, service managers can go a long way to harnessing the promotional potential of the perception and expectation relationship by using this most valuable asset. If staff are properly trained, well motivated and have good communication with library managers, they can strive to create a positive library experience for all users all of the time. *As Bitner (1990: 79)* suggests:

“Strategies relating to training, monitoring and motivating service personnel and to the design and control of consistent physical evidence should be developed on the basis of customer input and recognition of the marketing input of these elements.”

If the library experience is positive, the perception will be favourable and service use will continue. Similarly library staff have the promotional potential to communicate realistic service expectations to users, which in many cases would mean raising historically low expectations of the service, by simply telling users what services are now available and expanding their service experience horizons.

In other words encouraging users to take their “snapshot” of the service from a different perspective.

Promoting a service, therefore, does not have to be expensive and complicated.

Krieg-Sigman (1995: 425) suggests:

“The more complicated a promotion or communication becomes, the less likely the message will be understood.”

Thus, the service can harness the potential of the relationship between user and staff to effectively manage service expectations and create favourable service perceptions.

Similarly, the literature (for example *Bitner, 1990* and *Hébert, 1995*) stresses the importance of staff in managing service failure to avoid the creation of negative perceptions of the service. *Bitner (1990: 79)* states that:

“Even when the experience is not what the customer expects, there may be an opportunity to turn the encounter into a more satisfying one through understanding the customer’s attribution process.”

If expectations are properly managed for realism in the first instance, the situation can be avoided. However, the right balance must be struck to ensure that users’ expectations are not lowered so much that the service becomes perceived as irrelevant and unable to meet the user’s needs. The communication of budget restraints or service cuts in the climate that has prevailed in the public sector of recent years is perhaps unavoidable. However, *Krieg-Sigman (1995: 424)* suggests that negative service information can be managed through effective and honest communication:

“... Promote honesty. This aspect is doubly important when it comes to the “negative” things that libraries occasionally have to communicate – service cutbacks, budget shortfalls and so on.”

The research found, consistent with previous studies, that this potential for promoting and marketing the service via its staff was being underestimated. As *Doherty et al. (1995: 451)* note from their study findings:

“The uptake of marketing is still patchy. There is evidence of some strategic marketing going on, but marketing is used mostly in a piecemeal, short-term and tactical way, usually focusing on promotional activity.”

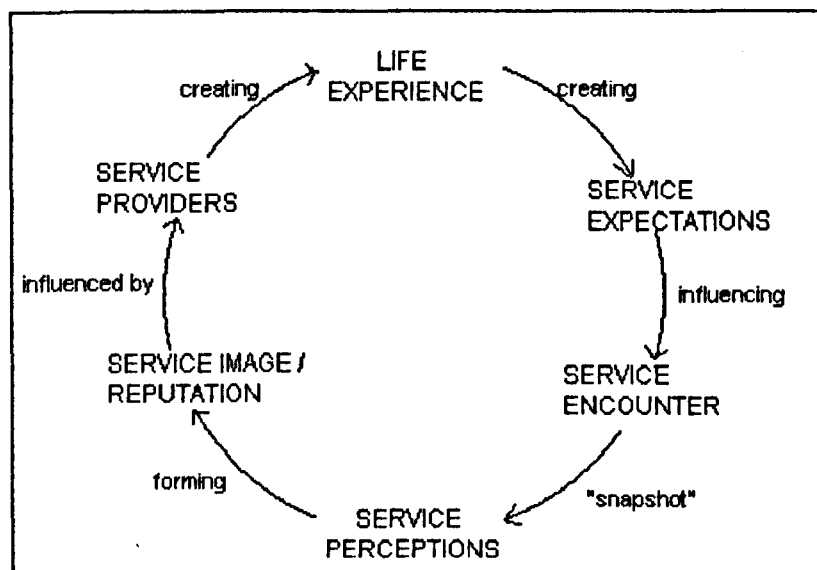
Throughout the focus groups, staff illustrated recognition of a desperate need for enhanced service promotion and consistent marketing strategies, and intimated frustration where this was concerned. Lack of money, time and managerial support were all attributed as factors contributing to what staff identified as the service’s failure to realise its full marketing potential.

The research fieldwork also found that for many of the frequent library service users interviewed, staff *are* the service. Interaction with staff and the help and support that they are largely perceived as giving was considered as the strongest influencing factor on the library experience for many of the users participating in this research. It was found that staff certainly form the most tangible representation of the service and as such their attitude, presentation and professionalism will influence the reputation and image of the service. Thus they are an important consideration in the expectation and perception formation and management process, because as *Bromley (1993: 23)* observes:

“Persons and organisations risk failing badly if they do not live up to their reputation, because their public react adversely if their expectations are frustrated.”

Ultimately the research identified that perceptions and expectations were strongly influenced by library staff and that, as such, staff hold the potential to make the difference in the library experience that ensures a good perception and subsequently realistic and favourable expectations are created of the library service. In this, the process is cyclical with positive perceptions perpetuating good expectations for the next service experience and so on. This is illustrated below by *figure 3*:

Figure 3 – The cyclical nature of the perception – expectation relationship



As *figure 3* illustrates, an individual's life experience, their past experiences and the internal and external mediating factors that they have been exposed to will impact upon the expectations they have of the library service. These expectations will be taken into and influence the service encounter. The service encounter itself is the point at which the user takes their "snapshot" of the library service and thus service perceptions are created. The perceptions formed of the service during the service encounter are then taken into a wider sphere as the individual communicates them to other people, thus affecting the library's image and reputation. However, service providers, through library staff and various management techniques, can influence the image and reputation of the library. Therefore it is possible to create a new experience and thus return the cycle to its beginning point with a new expectation created to take into the next service experience.

From a management perspective this cycle needs to be viewed as one of continuous improvement where the aim of the service is to at least meet or exceed the expectations that the user takes into the service encounter. In doing this, favourable service perceptions, image and reputation will be maintained or improved.

Making sense of the confusion

Chapter 4 illustrated the impact of societal changes, indicative of a move towards a post-modern era in society, on the expectations and perceptions that are created of the library service. These changes have become of increasing concern to the library profession over the last decade as their pervasiveness has increased.

Astbury (1994: 131), for example, observes that:

“Within the last decade, social economic, political and technological pressures and developments have intensified the debate about the nature and role of the public library in society.”

The fieldwork certainly indicated the impact of politics on the future expectations that users had expressed to the 1994 research and, for some of these users, the change of government has brought a change to their expectations. Users repeatedly raised issues of local government funding across the authorities as being a particular point of concern influencing their service expectations characterised by a general concern that libraries fall a long way down on a list of worthy public sector institutions behind schools, hospitals and social services.

The fieldwork evidence also indicated that a move towards a consumer-oriented society has had a significant impact on expectations of the public library service. As *Muddiman and Black (1993: 9)* observe:

“The formalisation of the relationship between the library and its public has placed an increased emphasis on words like “customer” and “consumer” in the delivery of services.”

This was particularly identified in terms of demand for changes in library opening hours to bring them in line with other services, especially those in the retail sector. Staff had experienced a desire from users for Sunday opening and for later evening opening. The data from users participating in the research supported this view.

Similarly, the research found that the technological advances in society and the use of I.T in all aspects of life had impacted significantly on user expectations.

Many of those users expressing a “will improve” future expectation for the library service in 1994, for example, attributed this to perceived technological improvements:

“Well at the time things were looking up, they were bringing out all of these computers.”
Respondent Comment (Authority C)

However, alongside high expectations for Internet access, PC availability and CD-ROM potential the research also indicated a desire among users, of all ages, for the library not to lose its community orientation, particularly its perceived neutrality. Similarly I.T was not perceived more favourably than the established book based services the library offers. This is where the confusion discussed by chapter 5, begins to creep in. Users and staff want to maintain the traditional roles and values of the service but at the same time they want the service to “move with the times”. Similarly perceptions of the wider public sector and the availability of local government resources temper these I.T expectations. As discussed in previous chapters, the research noted that whilst staff felt some users to be increasingly demanding in their service expectations, unaware of the funding implications, the users participating displayed sympathy towards funding issues. This was characterised by users tempering their expectations with a caveat statement “subject to the funding” or “if the money was available”.

As such, the research found increasing evidence of fragmented perceptions oriented towards different elements of the service and resulting in conflicting expectations. At its simplest, users expect I.T services but also expect that it will be difficult to fund these services. This leads to confused and fragmented perceptions of the library as a modern information provider but also as an under-funded public institution. As the nature of the perception – expectation relationship is cyclical, as illustrated by *figure 3*, confused perceptions of the service will impact on subsequent expectations. Such evidence highlights the need for service managers to understand user perceptions and expectations in order to effectively manage for service quality. *Flynn (1993: 196)* notes:

“The establishment of a clear set of expectations is of as much benefit to the organisation as it is the users. If staff are clear about what the user expects, their job is a lot easier to do.”

Public library management of expectations in order to create favourable perceptions provides the potential for the service to strike the right balance between the “cutting edge” and the “warm and fluffy” elements that chapter 5 explored as characterising the confusion.

Understanding the Relationships

To better understand the perception – expectation relationship in terms of the public library service, factors impacting upon it indicated by the research data have been formulated into a series of diagrammatic representations which will be presented and explained below. Three relationships have been identified in terms of the research. Firstly the relationship between the user and the library. Secondly the relationship between library staff and the library service and thirdly, the relationship between users and staff which illustrates the potential for mismatches in opinion as found by the *ASLIB* research.

Figure 4
Factors impacting on the formation of expectations and perceptions:
The user – library relationship

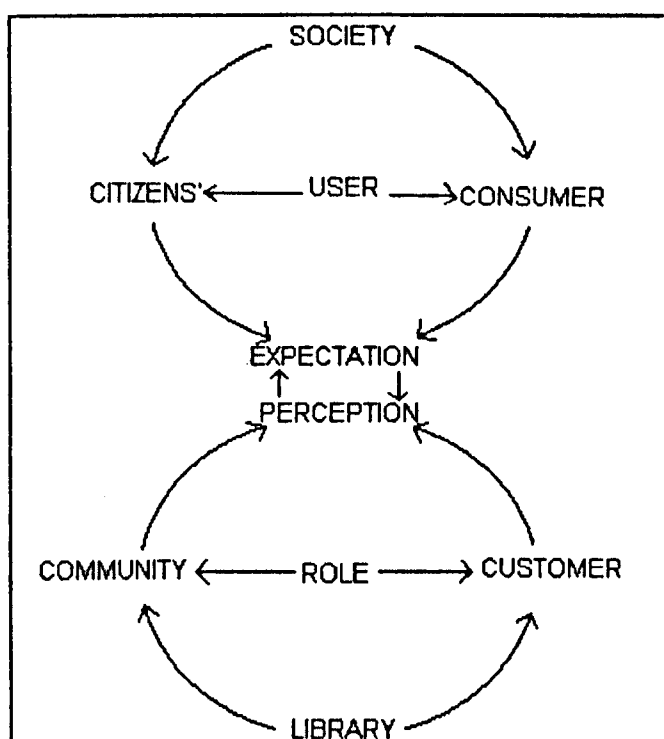


Figure 4 illustrates factors that have been identified in the fieldwork interviews with frequent library users, professional and paraprofessional staff, impacting on the formation of expectations and perceptions of the public library service. It can be viewed in sections. The bottom half represents the library and its role in the perceptions that are created about the service. It can be entered at either the library or at role. Similarly the top half of the figure represents factors influencing the expectations that will be taken into the service experience and it can be entered at society or user.

The figure can also be considered as a continuum illustrating two extremes, where the left side of the figure represents a focus on the wider community and the right side represents a focus on the individual customer. If the diagram is entered in the top segment at user, the user can be seen as either a customer or a citizen, a distinction that will be made by the type of use they make of the service. Is the service fulfilling their wants or their needs? Their expectation will differ depending on how they view themselves and their use of the service. For example, a consumer might have higher service expectations where as a citizen might have wider expectations of the service.

Entering the figure at society takes the process one step back to examine the type of society that the user is living in, and the library is responding to. In a consumer society the emphasis is the individual and service quality pertaining to the achievement of individual customer satisfaction. The type of society will affect the preconceptions taken into the service experience, in terms of stereotypes and media representation, influence from outside agencies and experience and knowledge as a service customer. In the citizens' society the emphasis is wider and concentrated on service quality achieved by a more collective community based satisfaction, as *Giappiconi (1995:102)* suggests:

"The librarian is invited to offer services which are perceived as being in the public interest and which correspond to the requirements of the population to be served."

This is reflected by the lower segment of the diagram, where the library and its role provide the entry points and where the left side shows a wider community emphasis and the right, the individual customer focus. The way the service promotes itself and its services and the “snapshot” that it creates during the service experience will be influenced by the emphasis that is placed on either the library’s customer or community role.

The central focus of the figure is expectation and perception. The two-way flow between them is intended to represent the fact that the two interact upon each other during the service experience as *Bolton and Drew (1991(a): 2)* summarise:

“A customer’s attitude about a service depends on his or her prior attitude, modified by his or her perceptions of current performance, and the discrepancy between the expectations and subsequent perceptions.”

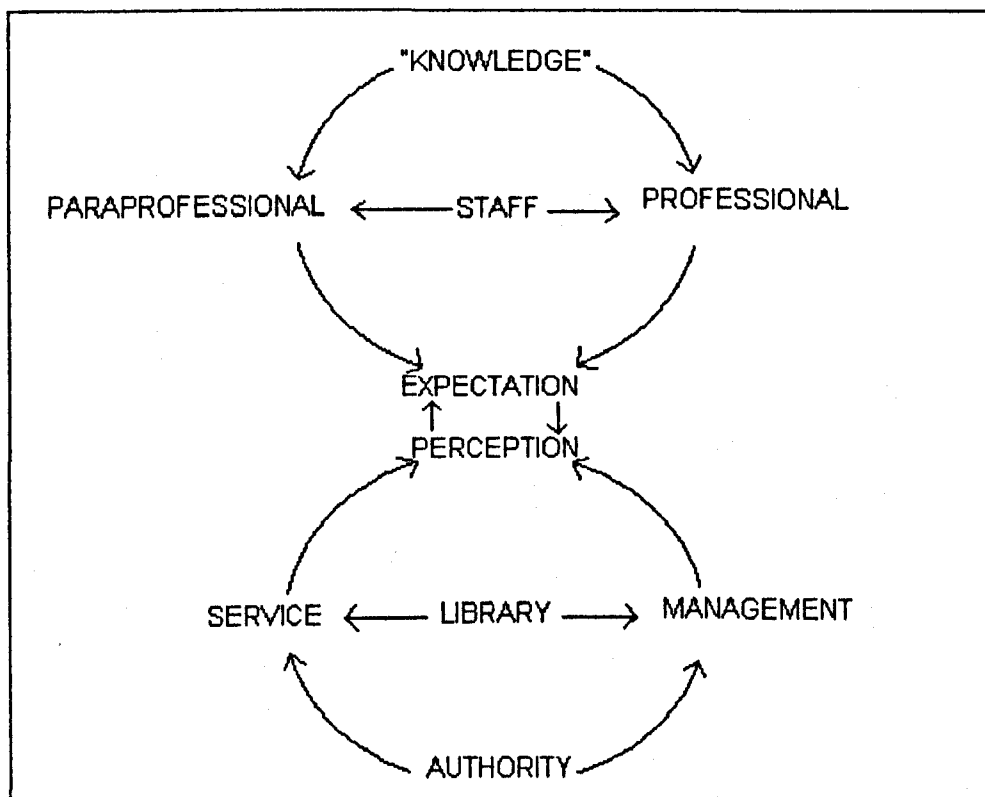
This is where the “snapshot” is taken. The diagram has attributed perception formation to the library and expectation formation to society based on the evidence from the fieldwork. In other words, outside mediating factors that impact on the expectations that a user takes into the service experience may be largely beyond the library’s control. The stereotypes that a user has been exposed to, their past experiences of the library service and mediating factors that shape their preconceptions of the library service such as parental influence, education and culture are all beyond the library’s immediate control. They will also differ for each individual user and though opinions and views about the library service may be the same among a group of users, the way in which they have been reached will differ according to a unique set of influencing factors.

The library can influence the perception that a user is left with after the service experience, by meeting expectations or by modifying expectations so that they are realistic about the service. Through promotion and communication via library staff the user can be left with a positive image of the service in the “snapshot” that they obtain during the service experience. The library has it in its power to meet both the needs of the community and the wants of the individual customer if it communicates with both to create a positive image and a realistic perception of what the service is about. In fact in managing the

perception it creates it can begin to control expectations, as long as the interaction between the two is maintained and a communication process between library and society is fostered. If library managers can stay aware of what is expected from the service, they can attempt to manage those expectations by the perceptions that the service creates, as *Hernon and Schwarz (1996: 296)* suggest:

“Service quality and satisfaction view organizations and services from customer perspectives, not exclusively from organizational ones.”

Figure 5
Factors impacting on the formation of expectations and perceptions:
The staff – library relationship



The starting point of “knowledge” for *figure 5* represents the knowledge that staff possess of what the library service could be and should be doing. This knowledge will be based on experience of service users, the library world and of the authority they represent via personal experience and training, policy and the

professional press. The amount of and depth of this knowledge will depend on the grade of staff member, their qualifications and experience.

The fieldwork data suggested very little difference in perception of the service between professional and paraprofessional staff. However, what was noted was that whilst perceptions were consistent, their orientation differed with paraprofessional staff focusing on user needs and front end service provision because of the high level of day to day contact that they have with the users. The emphasis of professional staff perceptions however, was directed towards management issues. This can be accounted for by the move in library management towards issues such as customer care and customer focus, self-assessment for service quality and quality management, that contribute to the overall service being provided and the subsequent expectations that staff have of it. In this respect as with *figure 4* this diagram represents a continuum, in this case between front-end service provision and service management.

The library side of the diagram has been widened from that presented by *figure 4*, to include the local authority. This takes into consideration other implications that act upon the perceptions that a library service is able to create of itself. These can include funding, policy, politics and stakeholding groups, such as elected members. Much as society represents the outside influences on user expectations in *figure 3*, authority represents the outside influences, impacting on the library's ability to create perceptions. The fieldwork evidence found that these factors played an important role in perceptions that the library created of itself as a modern information provider, particularly in terms of information technology provision.

The point of exchange between authority created perceptions and staff expectations was found to be the source of much frustration for library staff. In many instances staff felt that the service should be providing more but lacked the financial support to see their expectations through. As has been noted the research found that staff have very high expectations of themselves and the services that they provide which exacerbates such frustrations. This will be

discussed further in relation to the *ASLIB* mismatch of opinion between the professional staff and the other groups.

Figure 6
Factors impacting on the formation of expectations and perceptions:
The user – staff relationship

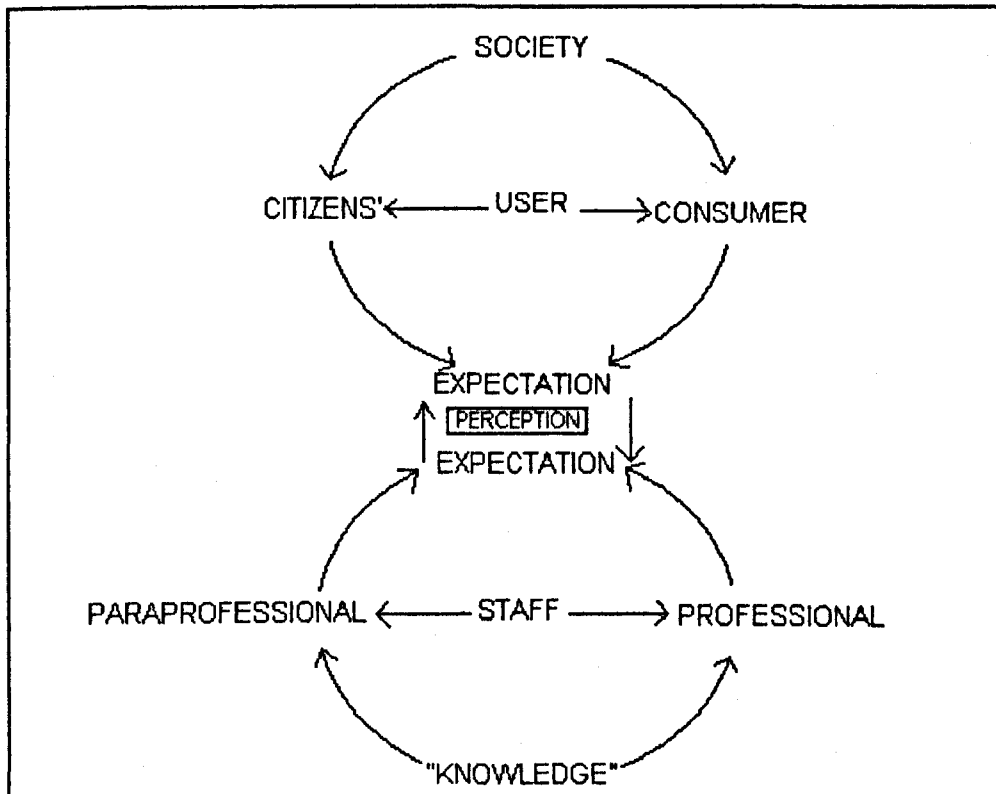


Figure 6, at its simplest, brings the user and staff sections of the two previous diagrams together to show the different factors that influence the expectations formed of the service. The point of exchange in this diagram is the perception that is eventually created via the library service experience. If each section is considered, the mismatch that the *ASLIB* research found becomes clear due to the different factors that shape the expectation of the service and thus ultimately the perceptions either group create about the library. However, the *ASLIB* research also identified an expectation mismatch between professional and paraprofessional staff. As Chapter 6 discussed this was not the finding of this research, where perceptions of the service were found to be similar between different levels of staff but that the orientation of these perceptions differed.

Figure 6 also clearly illustrates the strength of the relationship between users and staff as their perceptions are shaped by the interaction of their expectations. The potential for library managers is to use this relationship between user and staff expectations to create favourable library perceptions. This can be achieved through staff training; library promotion and as suggested by the services marketing literature (*Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996*) educating and re-educating users to better fulfil their role in the service encounter and thus the perception formation process.

Returning to the Beginning: Conclusions on the *ASLIB* Mismatch

Conclusions in terms of the mismatch of opinion from which the research originates can be characterised by the idea of a “frustration cycle”. In 1994, *ASLIB* found professional staff to be pessimistic about the future of the service “*perhaps anticipating the effects of financial stringency*”. The research evidence indicates that staff are now more optimistic than they were in 1994, perhaps feeling that the service has come through the worst and is on an upward climb, characterised by the prospect of new directions for the future and increased I.T opportunities widening the library role. Similarly this research found that on the whole, users appear more pessimistic than they did in the 1994 research. Service cuts to other public institutions, particularly the health-service and education prompted fears for the library service among service users.

In this respect it would appear that user perceptions and expectations are “out of step” with staff expectations and perceptions. Perhaps this has been exaggerated by the increased ICT expectations that users are tending to display. I.T. is seen as expensive and as has been widely discussed the research fieldwork identified a definite perception from users that funding cuts are inevitable and a sense of sympathy tempering subsequent expectations of the service as a result.

If perceptions and expectations of the service are envisaged as a continuous cycle, users appear to be viewing the service at a different point to staff. This is

due to different knowledge about the service and the different influences shaping the expectations of each group as illustrated in *figure 6*. In 1994 authorities were perhaps successfully “papering over the cracks” that they knew existed in their services. Since then the increased pressure on the service has made these cracks visible to the public. However, users may have greater I.T. expectations of the service but there is a realism that such things cost money. This research found users to be sympathetic to the fact that the library service does not always have the funds to offer the services they would like to see. On the other hand staff feel that users don’t always understand the funding issues and therefore this heightens the sense of frustration that they feel.

The *ASLIB* research also found that there was a mismatch between the perceptions and expectations of professional and paraprofessional library staff. As discussed this research identified little variance in the perceptions of the service between the professional and paraprofessional staff participating. Where divergence in opinion was noted, it was in the orientation of these perceptions. Paraprofessionals are largely front-end service providers and as such have greater contact with user complaints and comments and therefore their perceptions are focused on this aspect of the service, where as professional staff tended to orient their perceptions towards management strategies. This did however, provide the research with some evidence to suggest that paraprofessional staff feel, to a certain extent, caught in the middle between the differing expectations and perceptions of professional staff and their service users, clearly understanding the expectations and perceptions of both.

Summarising the Relationships

In order to formalise the relationships outlined above the following model has been designed by condensing *figures 4, 5 and 6*, to illustrate the potential of applying the research findings for service management.

The research evidence has indicated that, understanding the relationship between user expectations and perceptions and the library service's role in the creation of those perceptions and management of those expectations, could prove vital for a service as it embraces the challenges of technological and societal change. It has been noted that the perception - expectation relationship has implications for service quality; staff training; service marketing and promotion. This is particularly relevant given the research evidence of confusion felt about the service's role by users and staff.

Figure 7
The perception creation and expectation management model

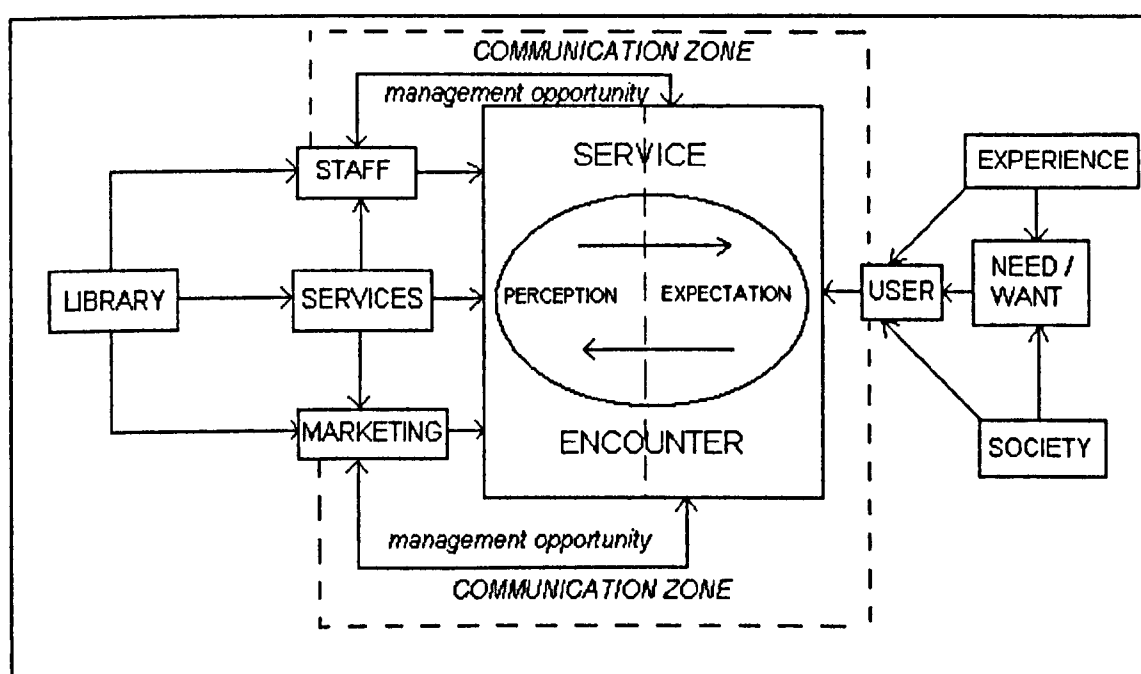


Figure 7 illustrates the areas where a library service can harness the potential of the perception - expectation relationship. The library creates perceptions via its service, its staff and the marketing activities it conducts. These are exchanged with user expectations, created via user experience and society shaping wants and needs, during the service encounter. This is where the service user takes the “snapshot” of experience.

The relationships between service staff and service marketing and the service encounter are characterised by the potential opportunity for expectations management. The research evidence indicates that via service staff, and service marketing, the service can manage for service quality, creating positive expectations of the service by communication with the user at the service encounter. The research indicates that staff play a vital role in the perception – expectation relationship and are one of the most important factors influencing users' service perceptions. In fact for many service users it is their relationship with library staff that **makes** their service experience. As such the potential of this resource for perception creation and expectation management needs to be recognised and exploited.

As already suggested, with the right communication even negative service encounters can be managed to ensure positive service perceptions are created. Therefore a communication zone is in place; encompassing the service encounter and relating service marketing and staff directly to service user. The findings of this research suggest that perceptions of the service and ultimately service expectations can be managed simply and effectively through open channels of communication between the service and its staff and service staff, and service users.

Potential for Future Research

It is felt that there are several directions in which this research could be developed and built upon. Firstly the Perception Creation and Expectation Management Model (PCEM) presented by *figure 7* currently exists simply as a representation of the relationship between perceptions and expectations of the library service and the potential implications that it could have for service management. A research opportunity certainly exists for the development of a working model that could be applied for service management.

Understanding the perception – expectation relationship and the role of the user and the library in it, has implications for effective service management across staff training and development, service marketing and promotion and managing for service quality. Similarly, a model of this nature might also prove useful in self-assessment exercises. Opportunity also exists for research into the design of expectation and perception data collection tools appropriate and sympathetic to the unique environment of the public library.

Focus groups conducted with staff illustrated a need for further information about non-user expectations and perceptions. The *ASLIB* data used for this study could be exploited in a similar way to consider the influences on non-user expectations and perceptions. A better understanding of non-service user perceptions and expectations would present the library service with data useful for marketing their services. It would also prove useful for conducting self-assessment, as it would allow greater understanding of what presents barriers to service use and why particular individuals do not perceive the service as relevant.

Research potential also exists in the “cutting edge – warm and fluffy” dichotomy that was identified by the research and would prove particularly relevant as the service addresses the new millennium. There is particular scope for more detailed analysis of the impact of information technology on service expectations and the problems that failing to meet I.T expectations could create for perceptions of service quality. Examination of the speed with which these expectations change, given the speed at which technology progresses, via a longitudinal study, could provide very useful information for service managers trying to keep up with snowballing I.C.T expectations and investigating future service options and diversification.

Similarly it is felt that there is potential research opportunity in exploration of the impact of a consumer society on expectations and subsequent perceptions of a service whose principles are grounded in the welfare state. Further research into the impact of societal changes on the community role of the service would not only prove interesting but could provide valuable information for service managers to enable them to manage through the confusion. In this respect the

implications of the staff and user relationship on service effectiveness also present the potential for further research at a micro-level into special groups and the provision of public library services to those groups.

In Conclusion

In chapter 1 the aims of this research were set out as the consideration of:

How perceptions of the public library service are formed.

What influences these perceptions?

How do perceptions of the service interact with users' expectations of it?

What is the relationship between user perceptions and expectations and those of library staff?

The reasons for the mismatch in future expectations identified by the *ASLIB* research.

It is felt that these research aims have been realised. The research set out to achieve a better understanding of the way that perceptions and expectations of the library service are formed and influenced and the way that they interact upon each other. The evidence presented in this thesis outlines the impact that experience, society and service staff can have on the perceptions that are created of a library service and thus the expectations that they perpetuate, revealing the cyclical nature of the expectation and perception relationship. A broad understanding of this nature clarifies the specific mismatch identified by the *ASLIB* research and illustrates the potential of the relationship for effective service management.

The importance of understanding library users' expectations and perceptions is illustrated by the confused perceptions of the public library service identified by this research. At a time when the service needs to be clear in its goals and direction to maintain its essentiality into a new millennium and a widening and growing information market place, the public library service cannot afford to be

lost in a haze of confusion. Whilst further investigation is needed, the evidence presented here suggests that the potential for perception creation and expectation management in managing for service quality, service promotion and customer care is exciting and immense.

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Appendix A – Research Instruments

Section One - Telephone Interview with frequent library users

Introductory Telephone Call

Following the receipt of the reply form from the potential respondent. Those responding positively will be contacted by telephone to arrange an interview time and date with them. I must be prepared to conduct the interview there and then if required as this may be what respondents want.

The following is an outline of what might be said during the course of an introductory phone call to respondents of the research.

Hello, can I speak toplease?

Hello. I am Emma Lilley, I'm a research student at the university of Sheffield, I contacted you about participating in my public library research.

You were kind enough to agree to me interviewing you and I am just calling to arrange a date and time for that interview that is convenient for you.

The interview will take about 20-30 minutes and so I'd be grateful if you could suggest a time that might be convenient for me to call back and actually conduct the interview over the telephone.

ARRANGE DATE AND TIME AND CONFIRM.

Okay, thanks for your time and I shall speak to you again on the

.....
 ...

Bye.

Introductory Statement

Hello. Can I speak to.....please?

When respondent has come to the phone:-

Hello it's Emma Lilley is it still convenient to do the interview for my research with you now?

If respondent says that it is not convenient arrange and confirm an alternative date and time and thank respondent.

If respondent says it is convenient, continue as follows;

Okay, what I want to do in this interview is get some idea of what you think about the public library service and why you have the opinions about it that you do. I will also ask you to think back a little bit to the research that you took part in in 1994.

Is there anything that you would like to ask me about the research, or the interview that we are going to do today?

Answer any questions and address concerns.

Before we start the interview, do you mind if I record our conversation? It is just to save me scribbling furiously while I am talking to you. No one will have access to or hear the tape but me.

Okay then if you are happy with everything, I'll turn the tape recorder on and we'll get started.

Before I ask you the first question though I need to get your permission on tape, to quote from our conversation in my written work. If I do quote from our conversation I will protect your identity. Are you happy for parts of the interview to be used in my written work?

Get respondent's audible agreement.

Thank you.

Okay then now onto the first question.

SECTION 1

Q1.1 Firstly, I'd like you to think back to the research that you took part in in 1994 for the Public Library Review. In that research you were asked whether you thought that the public library service generally is likely to *deteriorate* or *improve* over the next five years or *stay the same*.

You answered.....

I'd like you to tell me *why* you gave that answer/ Can you tell me why you were uncertain about the future of the public library service?

PROBES:- Do you still feel the same about this?
Why?

Now I am going to ask you some questions about your experience of libraries.

Q1.2 Can you tell me what your first memory of using the public library is?

PROBES:- Could you tell me about it please?
Who did you go with?
What did you go for?

Q1.3 Could you tell me approximately how long you have been using the public library service for?

Q1.4 When you use the public library, what do you like to be called?

PROBES:- Customer, Client, User, Borrower, Consumer, Member, Reader.
Why do you like to be called that?

Q1.5 Do you use any other library service, other than that provided by your local public library authority?

PROBES:- School/college/university, company, other public library authority.
What do you use it for?

SECTION 2

I am going to change the format of the questions that I ask you in this section of the interview. What I am going to do is present you with some statements that have been made on or about the public library service in recent years. What I want you to do is tell me your strength of agreement or disagreement with each statement. After you have given me your response to the statement I will ask you why you chose that particular response.

Okay, are you happy with the way this part of the interview is going to work? (Answer any queries).

Q2.1 Right then, the first statement is;

I IDENTIFY PUBLIC LIBRARIES WITH A SERVICE PROVIDING BOOKS FOR LOAN AND REFERENCE.

Can you tell me whether you:

5	4	3	2	1
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

with this statement.

PROBES:- Can you tell me why you selected that answer?
What about the other materials a public library stocks and loans do you think people are aware of them?
What about other services that a public library offers, do you think it is recognised for them?

Q2.2 And what about this statement, could you tell me the strength of your agreement or disagreement with it;

THE QUALITY OF A PUBLIC LIBRARY IS DIRECTLY RELATED TO THE AMOUNT OF FUNDING THAT IT RECEIVES.

Do you:

5	4	3	2	1
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

PROBES:- And could you tell me why you chose that response please?
What about the other resources of a public library, such as its staff and stock, do you think they are important to the quality of the service you receive?

Q2.3 The next statement is;

I DO NOT LIKE TO ASK LIBRARY STAFF FOR HELP BECAUSE I DON'T THINK THAT THEY WILL BE ABLE TO HELP ME.

Do you:

5	4	3	2	1
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

PROBES:- Could you tell me why you selected that answer please?
What is your personal experience of public library staff?
What about the availability of library staff?

Q2.4 The next statement is about information technology;

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IS A CHALLENGE THAT THE LIBRARY WORLD NEEDS TO FACE IF IT WANTS TO BE RELEVANT TO THE NEXT GENERATION.

Again could you tell me whether you

5	4	3	2	1
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

with that statement?

PROBES:- And why do you think that?
What sort of Information Technology do you think should be available in the library? (PROMPTS: Internet, CD-ROM, OPAC).
What about for the library itself? (PROMPTS: Computerised Issue).

Q2.5 Could you use the card to tell me the strength of your agreement or disagreement with this statement;

PUBLIC LIBRARIES ARE CLOSED WHEN I WANT TO USE THEM.

Do you:

5	4	3	2	1
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

PROBES:- Can you tell me why you chose that answer please?
Do you think that public libraries should be open later in the evening and on Sundays and Bank Holidays?

Q2.6 Again could please tell me your strength of agreement with this statement please:

PUBLIC LIBRARIES NEED TO OFFER SERVICES THAT WILL ATTRACT ME TO USE THE LIBRARY FOR THE SHEER FUN OF BEING THERE.

Do you:

5	4	3	2	1
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

PROBES:- Can you tell me why you chose that answer?

Q2.7 The next statement is;

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING ABOUT THE PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE IS ITS STAFF.

Could you tell me whether you:

5	4	3	2	1
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

with this statement?

PROBES:- Can you tell me why you chose that answer?
Do you think that it is important that library staff are well qualified.

What sort of qualifications do you think library staff should have?

Q2.8 Now a statement about the type of people who use the public library service, could you tell me your response to this statement please;

LIBRARY USERS AS A WHOLE REFLECT A MIDDLE CLASS BIAS.

Do you:

5	4	3	2	1
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

PROBES:- Again could you tell me why you chose that response please?

Q2.9 And what about this statement, do you agree or disagree with;

IT IS MORE IMPORTANT TO ME THAT A LIBRARY IS AN EDUCATION SUPPORT CENTRE, THAN THAT IT STOCKS POPULAR MATERIALS FOR LOAN.

Do you:

5	4	3	2	1
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

PROBES:- Again, can I ask you to tell me why you picked that response?

Q2.10 I'd like you to tell me your strength of agreement or disagreement with this statement about the public library service;

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY SHOULD STICK TO WHAT IT KNOWS BEST - BOOKS!

Do you:

5	4	3	2	1
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

PROBES:- Can you tell me why you think that?
What services do you think a public library should offer?

Q2.11 And what about this statement;

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IS A PLACE OF STUDY - A PUBLIC WORK PLACE.

Again, do you

5	4	3	2	1
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

with this statement.

PROBES:- And why did you pick that answer?

Q2.12 And finally on this section, what is your strength of agreement or disagreement with this statement;

IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY OF THE FUTURE - BOOKS WILL BE A THING OF THE PAST.

Do you:

5	4	3	2	1
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

PROBES:- And why did you select that answer?

SECTION 3

Now I want to ask you some questions about you. The answers you give here will be used to help me compare and analyse my data.

Q3.1 Could you tell me which newspapers your read regularly (at least once a week)?

Q3.2 And which T.V. channel(s) would you say you watch most often?

Q3.3 As far as you can remember, have your circumstances changed since you took part in the researchin 1994?

PROBES:- Job, Education, Income, Main wage earner in household, library use?

SECTION 4

Q4.1 [Finally, before I switch the tape recorder off,] is there anything you would like to raise about the way you use and view the public library service that you haven't had the opportunity to discuss during the course of the interview?

Q4.2 FOR USE WITH PILOT STUDY RESPONDENTS ONLY

Finally, could you tell me if there was anything that you found difficult to answer or that you didn't think was well explained during the course of the interview?

Closing Statement

Right, that's it. (Turn tape recorder off).

Thank you for your time, I have really enjoyed talking to you, your opinions are very important to my research.

Section Two– Focus Groups with professional and paraprofessional staff

An introduction to the research for focus group members

(sent to group participants in advance of the groups)

About me and my research.

My name is Emma Lilley and I am a second year Ph.D. student with the Department of Information Studies, University of Sheffield. The title of my Ph.D. project is; “The relationship between expectations and the publics’ perception of public library services”. Professor Bob Usherwood is supervising the research and my funding is from the British Academy.

The focus group that you will be taking part in is part of this Ph.D. research, which is follow up work to that done by ASLIB in 1994 for the Department of National Heritage Public Library Review. Specifically I am looking at frequent users expectations and perceptions of the public library service and the relationship that exists between users’ expectations and perceptions of the service and staff expectations and perceptions of it.

Aims of the focus group.

The aim of the focus group that you will be part of, will be to get a discussion going about some of the issues that have come up in my fieldwork interviews with users and out of the literature. Most importantly however, will be to see what you, the people who work in the service and have day to day contact with the users, really think about some of these issues.

Themes and issues.

The discussion in the group will depend on what you have to say and whilst I have a framework and some guiding questions prepared to get the discussion going I am afraid I don't have a structured and ordered list of questions that I can give to you in advance. However, I can provide you with the following list which are just some of the key themes and issues I am hoping to cover in the group.

Users' expectations:- What influences them.

What they are.

Changes in them.

Users' perceptions:- What influences them.

What they are.

Their relationship with users' expectations.

Their relationship with your perceptions.

The importance of managing users' expectations and perceptions.

The impact of policy and management tools on users' expectations and perceptions of the public library service.

I hope this information is useful to you. I want the group to be quite informal and relaxed and I'd like you to feel free to be open and honest throughout the discussion. It is what you think that is really important to my research. May I take this opportunity to thank you for your time and the role that you will be playing in my research and I look forward to meeting you soon.

Focus Group Guide

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

Firstly I'd like to thank you all for coming and for sparing what I know is your precious time to be part of my research. I'd also like to thank [.....] for organising this focus group and enlisting your help on my behalf.

Right, I'd like to start things off by introducing myself and by telling you a little bit about what I am doing and why I am here today. I am hoping that you have all had some information about me and my research, but just to recap a little anyway. My name is Emma Lilley and I am a second year research student at the University of Sheffield. I am doing some follow up work for my Ph.D. to the research that ASLIB did in 1994 for the Department of National Heritage Public Library Review. The project is entitled, "The relationship between expectations and the public's perception of public library services". Specifically I am looking at users' expectations and perceptions, the relationship between them and the relationship between the expectations and perceptions that users and professional staff have of the service. My funding is from the British Academy and my supervisor is Professor Bob Usherwood.

What I want to do today is get a discussion going about some of the issues that have come up in my fieldwork interviews with users and out of the literature. Really I want to see what you, the people who work in the service and who have day to day contact with the users, think about some of these things. I'd like you to feel free to be honest and open throughout the discussion.

Onto some practicalities, I need to tape record the interview, because I won't be able to scribble down everything and listen to what you have to say. I would really appreciate it if you could wave or shout at me if you here the tape click off, because I'll have to turn it over! I won't be part of the discussion, I will just ask some general questions to promote discussion and get things moving.

Does anyone have anything that they want to ask me about the research or today's group?

Okay then I'll get the tape switched on and we can get things underway.

Focus Group Guide

1. *I'd like to start today's discussion by asking you your views about user perceptions, what do you think peoples' perceptions of the service are?*

Probes:

- How far are user perceptions of the service influenced by experience?
- How are non-user perceptions influenced?
- What affect do the policies of quality management and customer care really have on user perceptions?
- Are perceptions of the service affected by the fact that the library is council run?
- Does the public library service still suffer from stereotyped perceptions?
(*Note probe on community perception, as noted in user interviews, if necessary*).

2. *What do you think the people who are coming through the doors and using your service are expecting from it?*

Probes:

- Why do you think they have these expectations?
- How far do user expectations reflect the reality that you as library staff know?
- Are expectations changing due to what is happening elsewhere in service industries?
- Can we change user expectations of the service? (Do we want to?)
- What about low expectations being easily met?

3. *How important is library image to the way it is perceived and what is expected from it?*

Probes:

- Are there any links between the reputation of the library and user perceptions of it?
- To what extent does the national press impact on the way perceptions of the public library service are formed?
- Do national government initiatives affect public library service image?
- Do we need to promote the service more?
- How can we promote the service?

NOTE: Question 4 will need to be flexible in the way it is asked to consider the way the discussion before it has progressed.

4. *Finally, I'd just like to bring together everything that you've been saying and ask, can we manage user expectations and perceptions?*

Probes:

- What is the relationship between expectations and perceptions?
- Do users know what they want the service to be anymore?
- Where should the balance be struck between the traditional service and the service of the future?
- How do we decide whose expectations to meet?

Appendix B – Correspondence to Potential Frequent User Respondents

LETTER ONE – INITIAL REQUEST

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION STUDIES

Postal address: Western Bank, Sheffield S10 2TN

Location: Regent Court, 211 Portobello Street, Sheffield S1 4DP

Tel. 0114-2222630 **Fax.** 0114-2780300**E-mail:**

dis@sheffield.ac.uk WWW: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/~is/home.html>

Mr. A. Respondent
1 Participant Road
Authority A
PH1 1DD

**SAMPLE LETTER
1ST MAIL OUT**

22 October 1997

Dear Mr. Respondent,

My name is Emma Lilley and I am a research student at the University of Sheffield, where I am conducting a follow up study to the Public Library Review for which you were kind enough to be interviewed. I am writing to ask you if you would be prepared to be interviewed again, this time by me for my Ph.D. research. I would want to ask you about the research that you took part in, in 1994 and your opinions and perceptions of the public library service now.

The interview would last about twenty minutes and could be conducted at your convenience, preferably by telephone but I will visit you in your home if necessary. Your participation is vital to my research and therefore, I would be most grateful if you would consider taking part in my Ph.D.

I enclose a stamped addressed envelope and a form for you to reply to me. I would appreciate it if you could return the form even if you do not intend to take part in the research. If you agree to take part I shall contact you again to arrange and discuss your interview further with you. If you require any further information before you decide whether or not to participate, please do not hesitate to contact me and I will be happy to discuss the research with you. I can be contacted at the University of Sheffield on 0114 2222693 or at home on 01773 749550. Alternatively my Supervisor Dr. Bob Usherwood can be contacted at the University on 0114 2222635.

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely,

Emma Lilley.

LETTER TWO – SECOND REQUEST**UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD
DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION
STUDIES****Postal address:** Western Bank, Sheffield S10 2TN**Location:** Regent Court, 211 Portobello Street, Sheffield S1 4DP**Tel.** 0114-2222630 **Fax.** 0114-2780300**Email:** dis@sheffield.ac.uk **WWW:** <http://www.shef.ac.uk/~is/homehtml>

Mr A Respondent
1 Participant Road
Authority A
PH1 1DD

6 January 1998

Dear Mr Respondent,

My name is Emma Lilley and I am a research student at the University of Sheffield, where I am conducting a follow up study to the Public Library Review for which you were kind enough to be interviewed. I wrote to you in October of last year and I am writing to you again to ask if you would consider taking part in my Ph.D. research.

I have had a good response to my research from people in your area, but I am particularly interested in talking to you because of the view you expressed about the future of the public library service when you were interviewed for the Public Library Review research in 1994.

It is particularly important to my research to hear your opinions of the public library service. I would therefore, be most grateful if you would consider being interviewed by me about this. The interview itself will last about twenty minutes and will be conducted over the telephone at a time convenient to you.

I enclose a stamped addressed envelope and a form for you to reply to me. I would appreciate it if you could return the form even if you do not intend to take part in the research. If you agree to take part I shall contact you again to arrange and discuss your interview further with you. If you require any further information before you decide whether or not to participate, please do not hesitate to contact me and I will be happy to discuss the research with you. I can be contacted at the University of Sheffield on 0114 2222693 or at home on 01773 749550. Alternatively my Supervisor Dr. Bob Usherwood can be contacted at the University on 0114 2222635. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely,

Emma Lilley.

REPLY FORM

PLEASE COMPLETE THIS FORM AND RETURN IT IN THE STAMPED ADDRESSED ENVELOPE PROVIDED

I *will / will not be willing to be interviewed as part of your Ph.D. research.

(*please delete as appropriate)

Name:.....

Address:.....

.....

.....

.....

Contact telephone number (including STD code):.....

Please could you indicate at what time it is most convenient to contact you on this telephone number.

.....

.....

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME.