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## Socio-spatial relationships : conflicts and compromises in a public library

Annette Prosterman  
*Loyola University Chicago*

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

SOCIO-SPATIAL RELATIONSHIPS:  
CONFLICTS AND COMPROMISES IN A PUBLIC LIBRARY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS  
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

BY  
ANNETTE PROSTERMAN

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

In a revival of a long-submerged theoretical perspective dating back as far as Frederick Engels (Gottdiener, 1991), a growing number of social scientists since the 1970s are asserting that spatial forms and social processes are closely inter-related and, further, influence each other. Henri Lefebvre, often cited as sparking this revival, claims, "space is permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations, but also is producing and produced by social relations" (1979, p. 286). The organization of space is seen as a product of social practice, and social processes, in turn, are affected by space. From this perspective, space is no longer perceived as merely a passive container of social activity, as it had been for several decades before the 1970s, but also as an active influence upon it. Space is thus recognized as an important factor in explaining and understanding social activity. In a capitalistic society, for example, space is a valued resource that is consumed.

Many social scientists, most notably David Harvey (1973, 1982, 1985), Manuel Castells (1977), Anthony Giddens (1981, 1984), Mark Gottdiener (1985), Edward Soja (1989),

and Sharon Zukin (1991), are inspired by Lefebvre and have expounded on his work. Yet the discussion of socio-spatial relationships is still largely theoretical and abstract (Sayer, 1985; Beauregard, 1987). More grounded research seems necessary to advance this field. Particularly underdeveloped is the area of social-spatial situations in everyday life. Most of the social scientists who have conducted actual research on the sociology of space have focused primarily on macro-level units of analysis and investigated such aspects of society as settlement patterns, land use, and structural organization (Harvey, 1985; Dear and Wolch, 1987; Soja, 1989). They do not address how struggles involving social space unfold in the day-to-day lives of ordinary people.

There has been some research on the use of and conflict over valued space on a microsociological level. One of the few social scientists who has done empirical, grounded research on the use of space is David Cornwell (1973), who studied the colonization of a public toilet facility in London by "tramps." Rather than using this facility only in passing as city officials intended, these men made the facility their shelter and hang-out. Cornwell found that, to a great extent, other patrons and the staff did not contest their doing so. The tramps kept the attendant from becoming lonely, and, by their sheer number, protected him from thugs. As long as other patrons were not offended or

intimidated and did not complain about their presence, the attendant allowed the tramps to stay. Most often, other patrons seemed indifferent to their presence and did not complain, as long as the tramps did not come physically close or try to interact with them. The tramps understood these limits and respected them.

Another study by Kim Hopper (1991) discussed the appropriation of space in a United States international airport by homeless people for use as a residence. Hopper also found that security and custodial personnel of the facility were accommodating. They related to the plight of the homeless and felt that, under slightly different circumstances, they might be joining them. Most complaints against the homeless were from the airlines which leased the space; travelers only occasionally complained and then because one of the homeless had approached them and asked them for money. Hopper speculated that if the number of homeless people increased, especially if they were less adept at "passing" for airline travelers, the tolerant atmosphere would dissipate. Tension would mount as the "resource-rich" environment became resource-poor.

These studies suggest that while space may be a valued resource, public space is viewed by members of the public as a resource to be shared. Conflict and contention may be tempered in the day-to-day, at least in the public realm, as people occupying space engage in a process of making room

and adjusting to the needs and concerns of other users. The limits to which the more "respectable" citizenry are willing to go in sharing space may also be contingent on the extent to which they identify with the conflicting groups or feel threatened by them, either in terms of personal safety or in terms of losing access to the space themselves.

Public places provide fascinating sites in which to further investigate socio-spatial relationships on the microsociological level because the potential for conflict in these relatively neutral territories is so great. Free and open space in this country is currently being altered by private interests. As Gary Marx explains,

The distribution of public-private space is changing. There has been an enormous growth in what can be called quasi-public or quasi-private places. It is a simple ecological fact that as the ratio of public to private places shrinks, so too does our freedom of movement. Behavior in our society increasingly occurs in settings such as shopping malls, industrial parks, college campuses, airports, planned communities, and condominium complexes. These usually have well-defined perimeters and a limited number of points of entrance and egress, factors that aid access control. (1989, p. 511)

One group that is particularly hard-hit in this narrowing of public space are children of the lower classes. Historically, working and lower class children, who do not have the same access to their cities as those of higher classes due to lack of financial resources (to go to the movies, for example), have run throughout their neighborhoods, playing in courtyards, parking lots, and building lobbies, or hallways. Stanford Gaster (1991) has found that



access to these quasi-public areas have become increasingly restricted over the past few decades, in large part due to suspicion and fear. On one hand, fewer adults (especially parents) allow children to play in these areas for fear that they may become victims of crime or tempted themselves to participate in crime. On the other hand, other adults in the neighborhood do not allow children to play in these areas for fear that they are gang members or juvenile delinquents.

Gaster says that, lacking sufficient space that is truly accessible to them, lower-class children, as well as other less-advantaged groups such as the homeless, crowd into the few remaining public places that are available. Here, the potential for conflicts over the use of that space is intensified by the sheer number and kinds of people who wish to use the space for various purposes.

The potential for such conflict is high in public libraries, one of the few remaining public places generally free and open to the public. Although the American public library has evolved considerably from the original public reading room in Boston that was established in 1854, it is still primarily a housed collection of reading material held by public authorities to be available for use by all members of the community, whomever they may be (Shera, 1949; Paris, 1984).

It is within the micro-level social setting of a local public library that I have explored the concept of social space, the use of social space, and the conflicts and compromises involved in its use. This study focuses particularly on a group contending for space that was considered especially problematic if not deviant by a significant number of other patrons and staff who shared the library space--the children of the neighborhood in which the library is located.

This study is based on the observations and informal interviews I conducted in one of the 83 branch libraries of the Chicago Public Library System from January 1992 through June 1993. During that time, I visited the library over sixty times to observe patrons, staff, and other people who came there. To observe the full range of library activities, patterns of usage, and the interactions among people in this public space, I spread my visits throughout the days of the week and the periods of time that the library was open, except for the last five months, when I came regularly on Thursday evenings to act as a volunteer homework tutor for children using the library. With the exception of the first month of observation, I regularly conversed with the clerks, librarians, security guards, homework tutors, and patrons (particularly children) about the library and my study. I conducted more extensive interviews with the branch librarian, a library associate, three security

guards, and two volunteer tutors. As most of my conversations and interviews I conducted were with the library staff and volunteers, the point of view I gained through this study is strongly influenced by them.

The library discussed in this paper is called the Lake Crest Library, but this is not its actual name. Nor is the neighborhood referred to in this paper actually the Lake Crest neighborhood. I changed these names to safeguard the anonymity of the people who shared their observations, information, and feelings with me. For the same reason, some statistical and factual data regarding the library and its neighborhood has been slightly altered. No information, however, was changed so radically as to cloud the implications of the study's findings.

What I found in this study is similar to Hopper and Cornwell's findings, and is especially aligned with Cornwell's study. The staff of the Lake Crest Library, like the custodians at the airport and the attendant at the public rest room, were very sensitive to plight of the children who were contending for space, and to a great extent, tried to accommodate them. Unless they perceived that other patrons were physically threatened or highly annoyed, or unless other patrons complained about the children, the staff often allowed the space appropriators to appropriate, up to the point where they felt that the purpose of the library as they understood it was in danger.

It was the regular users who used the library for "legitimate" purposes who objected the most about the presence and actions of the space "invaders," but even they were remarkably compromising. Yet as the regular users and staff accommodated the invaders, they ultimately expected and pushed them to assimilate at least to some degree to the culture of the library, attempting to impose certain standards of behavior upon them. In the process of accommodation and assimilation, the nature of the space was subtly altered.

Compared to this study, the macro-level studies of industrial patterning and large-scale space consumption seem remote and uncompromisingly predictable, void of contingent meaning. On the micro-level, in day-to-day life, people are basically cooperative and often, to a sometimes surprising degree, are willing to share the space they occupy. Yet the basic findings are the same as Lefebvre's premises. Space in the Lake Crest Library is a valued resource. The interpretation of the purpose of that space influences the activity it contains. Activity acts back on the space, changing its nature and although more slowly and subtly, changing its very purpose.

CHAPTER II  
THE LAKE CREST LIBRARY

The Setting

The Lake Crest Branch of the Chicago Public Library is located along one of the Lake Crest neighborhood's busiest streets, surrounded by restaurants, shops, clinics, and bars. It is one of many branch libraries built in the 1950s and encloses about 12,000 square feet of space. Until January 1993, the library was open Monday through Thursday from 9:00 A.M. to 9:00 P.M., and on Friday and Saturday from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. Thereafter, it was open on two weekdays from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. and on two weekdays from 12:00 noon to 8:00 P.M., while Friday and Saturday hours remained the same.

During the time I studied it, the library was divided into four public areas, besides the rest rooms. On one side of the library was a large room set up primarily for adult users. The stacks, reference materials, periodicals, cataloging system, public typewriters, and a photocopier were located here, along with seven tables for public use and an information desk. The large room on the other side, with smaller furniture and cartoon posters on the walls, was designed primarily for children. The children's room was

smaller in area, yet, in the absence of long library shelves located on the other side, there was room for sixteen tables. These two rooms were open, but partially divided by an enclosed room, referred to by library staff as the "auditorium." The auditorium was used for several different purposes, such as General Equivalency Diploma (GED) classes, chess club meetings, and seasonal book sales.

In front of the auditorium and joining all the other parts of the library was the lobby/circulation area. People coming into the lobby from the entryway immediately mingled with those gathered at the long circulation counter to have their book loans processed, because the counter was located directly in front of the entrance and the lobby was very narrow. This could give one the impression, upon entering, that the library was a very busy and crowded facility, which it often was.

The library facility was insufficient in a number of ways, reflecting the declining economic conditions of the City of Chicago. The computer system was ancient, worked very slowly, and often "went down." Until a computerized search program was finally provided in 1993, patrons searched for library material on microfilm. The rest rooms were not remodeled, as many public facilities have been, to accommodate a wheelchair. Reading and, especially, audio material was dated, and there was not an extensive selection from which to choose. Even if more material were available,

however, there would have been a problem in finding space to shelve it. Tables in the reading areas were crammed together and often were crowded. The work of processing returned books often spilled over from the circulation desk and into the auditorium.

Yet the library as an institution offered the Lake Crest neighborhood more than reading materials and a place in which to use them, even though it barely had adequate space to provide those historically basic library functions. It had adapted to the needs of its neighborhood and served its community in a variety of other ways. The Lake Crest Library was also a community center where civic functions such as voting in governmental elections could be exercised by neighborhood residents. In addition, it offered a place where neighbors could gather together and participate in various library-sponsored community activities. For instance, the library sponsored a chess club, a "great books" discussion group, and a pre-school story-time program.

The library was also a center for learning. Adapting to the needs of the neighborhood it serves, the Lake Crest branch offered, in conjunction with social service agencies, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to its many patrons who primarily spoke Spanish, French, and Eastern European languages. It also offered GED classes, and occasional special interest seminars, such as a workshop on

how to start a small business. It also set up a volunteer tutoring program for the large number of elementary school children who come into the library after school.

By providing such a variety of services, in space that was already inadequate, the potential for stress between groups of people with varying needs and interests was great. Once, for example, when the Saturday afternoon chess club lost the use of the auditorium to a seasonal book sale, the chess players had to concentrate on their games in the children's room where not only were several children browsing among the bookshelves in close proximity and two adults reading stories out loud to children, but an animated "Great Books" discussion was going on as well.

#### Library Patronage and Patterns of Usage

The culturally diverse Lake Crest neighborhood supplied the library with most of its patrons. According to 1990 census figures (published in the January 24, 1991 issue of the *Chicago Sun-Times*), this neighborhood was roughly 40% white, 30% black, 20% Hispanic, and 10% Asian. These figures do not reflect, however, the ethnic diversity within each racial group. In addition to African Americans, West Indians, Caribbeans, and Africans of several different nations could be found among black people in Lake Crest. Lake Crest residents who were white included not only those born in the United States, but also immigrants from the



former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries. The Asians included primarily East Indians and Southeast Asians, particularly Vietnamese. While most of the Hispanics were Mexican in origin, some were Puerto Rican, Cuban, or from various South American countries.

The patrons of the Lake Crest Library seemed to represent all of the above mentioned racial and ethnic groups,<sup>1</sup> but not necessarily in the same proportions in which they were found in the larger neighborhood. The racial make-up of the library patrons varied according to age, the time of day, and whether the day was a weekday or Saturday.

I found that members of the same groups, in terms of race, age, and/or time/day of visit, often engaged in similar activities in the library. The first weekday morning I came to the library, for example, I found that of the 15 patrons in the library at that time, almost half were

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<sup>1</sup>Early in my research, I attempted to establish who, according to race and ethnic groups, the users of the library were at particular times of day. I found that accurately determining how well these groups were represented in the library through observation was not possible, and could arrive only at approximations. I found, for example, that a particular child looked Asian and had recorded this observation in my field notes, only to revise the entry when I later heard her speaking Spanish. Undoubtedly there are other such errors that I did not catch. In addition, I found that I could not place many individuals in a single category due to their apparent bi-racial or -ethnic heritage.

elderly white people. This pattern remained roughly consistent throughout my study. The primary activity of these senior citizens was to read newspapers. According to the branch librarian, many of these senior white people stayed at the library for hours although they often left by mid-afternoon.

Early in my study I noted two basic types of patrons between the ages of 40 and 65, regardless of race or ethnic background. First were those who came in hurriedly around the noon hour, during the evenings, or on Saturdays and who having found the reading material for which they were looking, left the library within 15-20 minutes. Second were those who stayed and read at the tables for longer stretches of time, joining the seniors who lingered in the library in a loose, unorganized group that members of the staff referred to as the "regulars." The primary activity of these regulars, like the older ones, was to read newspapers. An excerpt from my field notes of Monday, January 27, 1992 at 11:55 A.M. illustrates:

Adult side--12 patrons. 10 men and 2 women. Both women are white, one middle-aged, one young adult. Of the men, three are black, two Hispanic, one East Indian, four white. Two are seniors, five middle-aged, the rest young adult. Most the people here are reading newspapers. The two Hispanics, seated at different tables, are both reading paperbacks. One young man is studying. No one looks like they have come in with someone else--they all appear to be here as individuals.

Although there were a few young adults among the regulars who hung out at the library reading newspapers and

magazines for hours at a time, many young adults used the library as a place to study, bringing their text books with them and not referring to books on the library shelves. I found that these students would come at any time of day, but particularly in the evening. Most of these adult students were East Indian, Hispanic, or African American. Although I noticed that a few of them also participated in the ESL or GED classes held at the library in the evenings, but most of them, as far as I could determine in my observations, were not regular visitors to the library.

Other young adults came seemingly with the sole intention of accompanying their small children on Saturdays, during "Pre-School Story Time" on Wednesdays, and sometimes during weekdays or evenings. While it was most often a woman who accompanied a child, sometimes a man and occasionally both a man and woman did so, especially in the evenings or on Saturdays. On one Saturday, for example, I found in the children's room three white men sitting at different tables with a child nearby, reading stories to them. Also in the room were a Hispanic man and woman sitting with two girls. There were books on the table in front of them but they were all quietly conversing at that time. Most of the young adults who came with children either read to the children or listened to them read, interjecting a word now and then. Sometimes they would leave them on the children's side by themselves for awhile

as they went to search for "adult" reading material on the other side. The adults who came with children during the weekdays were usually white, but those who came in the evenings or Saturdays were of various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Teenagers, most of whom were from minority backgrounds, began to appear in the library late in the afternoon, but I saw them more often in the evenings. From my observations I got the impression that about 25% of the teenagers used the library primarily as a place to study and 25% used it primarily as a place to socialize. The other 50% engaged in a combination of both activities.

On late afternoons and early weekday evenings there were usually far more children in the library than teenagers, more in fact, than any other age group. When I first began to study the Lake Crest Library, elementary school-aged children, most of whom were either Jamaican, Haitian, or African American and few of whom were accompanied by an adult, came to the Lake Crest Library in force between 2:45 and 6:30 P.M. On one late afternoon early in February 1992 I counted 32 children out of the 41 patrons in the library, and 21 of these children were black. On another afternoon I counted 53 children out of 60 patrons, and 39 of these children were black. As much as possible, the children were confined by the security guard and other staff members to the children's section of the library because, the branch

librarian explained, adult patrons would complain if the children made very much noise (and the expectation was that they would). I noted that, like the teenagers, about 25% of these children seemed to use the library as a place to study, 25% used it as a place to socialize (or play), and 50% engaged in both activities simultaneously.

I learned through my discussions with some of these children and from the library staff, several of whom had made an effort to get to know these children and their families, that many of the children who came to the library were from homes where several relatives crowded together in small apartments. Often their parents were working and were not at home when the children got out of school. The library served as a safe haven when parents were at work and some children were not allowed to go home when their parents were not there. Both the clerk in charge of circulation and a security guard told me of situations in which children were not allowed home until 10:00 or 11:00 P.M. These children came to the library during the times it was open because there were few other places that allowed them to stay.

Within walking distance of the Lake Crest Library were ten public and parochial elementary and high schools serving about 13,000 children. None of these schools consistently offered after school programs. The clerk in charge of circulation once told me that although one of the schools

was accessible to children in the late afternoon, the school closed when classes ended at 2:30 and did not re-open until 4:30 P.M.

Within the same area were eight community organizations that offered educational, recreational, or arts activities for children, but only two of them were consistently open to children at the time they were released from school (2:30 P.M.). However, one of these two centers closed at 4:30 and the other at 5:00 P.M.--before many working parents were home. The other community organizations had programs that were scheduled for only one or two hours during the afternoon or evening at various times of the year. All but two of the eight centers were clustered at one end of the neighborhood, a mile or more from the Lake Crest Library. Those that were a mile away included the ones that were open immediately after school.

There were several public parks within walking distance of the library but only three had indoor facilities for recreational activities and only one of these facilities had regular afternoon and evening hours. It too was located about a mile from the library.

For the many children in the immediate area of the Lake Crest Library who came out of homes that were either crowded or unsupervised by an adult, the library was, in 1992, one of the only relatively safe, warm, and comfortable places to go. During the winter and early spring of 1992, they

flocked there *en masse*, and often not for the purpose of reading or studying, but to hang out and play with their friends, activities that were not endorsed by library personnel nor appreciated by adults; especially the "regulars" who were trying to read their newspapers and magazines at this time.

Thus, the stage was set for conflict between the children who were appropriating library space for their own purposes and the library patrons and staff who saw the library as a center for leisurely reading and learning. The interests of these two groups collided significantly during March of 1992. Before describing the nature and outcome of this conflict, however, I will discuss how people "normally" got along in the library, during times when they were not besieged by the space invaders, to provide a base for comparison.

#### Getting Along in the Library

For all their diversity, patrons generally got along very well in the Lake Crest Library and willingly shared the space and other resources that were there. Many times I saw similar scenes as a middle-aged black woman, who had spread a folder and notebook over half a table, pull her things in towards her to make more room for a middle-aged Asian man who had come to sit down opposite her with a couple of

magazines, only to see him gesture to her with a raised hand his willingness that she leave her materials were they were.

Stephen Carr, Mark Francis, Leanne Rivlin, and Andrew Stone, a team of architects and environmental psychologists, speak of public space as being controlled by cultural restrictions pertaining to "proper" behavior in all public places and by management policies specific to the particular public setting (1992). The cultural restrictions governing public places are the norms that ensure the preservation of these areas and the security of those who use them for socially accepted purposes. Some of these rules, those for which an offense is taken most seriously, are laws, and prohibit such activities as vandalism, loitering, soliciting without a license, disorderly conduct, drinking intoxicating beverages, and indecent exposure. Violators of such laws may be subject to ejection or banishment from the public place and often to arrest.

Informal rules governing behavior in public places also exist that pertain to behavior that is considered by members of society in general to be rude or offensive when done in public, behavior that can affect other people's use of space by making them annoyed or uncomfortable. Erving Goffman (1963) defines these minor offenses as "auto involvements" (such as nose-picking), "insufficient physical presence" (such as grumbling loudly to oneself), or the lack of "civil inattention" (prolonged staring at another individual).



Management policies are the rules specific to a particular kind of place that help to ensure the preservation of these areas and the security of those who use them for their particularly established purposes. In the case of a public library, these policies prohibit activities that are deemed by library officials to inhibit the use of the library materials or facilities by other patrons or disrupt the ability of patrons to focus attention on library materials. Activities that interfere with the ability of other patrons to use the facility for the purpose of reading, study, or research are considered by the management to be disruptive or deviant. In defining how people could be disruptive to others, one of the Lake Crest Library's security guards told me during an informal interview on March 5, 1992, "it's not just making noise that can be disruptive. People can be disruptive by how they look, how they smell, and what if someone comes up and touches you? That can be disruptive, too."

To my surprise, I learned from the Lake Crest branch librarian that prior to the 1990s, it was not felt necessary by the Board of Directors of the Chicago Public Library that policies regarding behavior in the library be formalized in writing and posted in libraries throughout the Chicago Public Library System. Until 1992, only an informal structure of rules existed to control the way space in the library was used, which was based on what several members of

the staff referred to as "common sense." This common sense seemed to dictate that, by and large, adult patrons in the Lake Crest Library did not engage in such activities as hoarding stacks of magazines, insisting that no other patron could sit with them at a table, striking up a conversation with a stranger who was trying to read, shouting to a friend across the room, or taking their shoes off and resting their feet up on a table as they might do in another setting.

Most adult patrons I observed appeared to share this "common sense" about library behavior, because I did not see them doing anything to consume an inordinate amount of space (or other library resources) or invade the space of others by unduly attracting their attention. Even those adults who I assumed were of immigrant backgrounds (because they spoke the languages of other cultures) seemed to be aware of these rules. I never heard or saw them "break" any rules, with the exception of very small infractions, such as talking in a normal speaking voice like almost every library user occasionally did when they forgot for a minute where they were.

Occasionally there were minor infractions of the rules, where disruption to other library users or staff was minimal. For example, I regularly saw one older woman in the library who apparently never learned the skill of reading silently and pronounced words out loud as she read. Yet she seemed to have understood that it was expected of

her to be reasonably quiet, because she mouthed the words in a barely audible whisper.

Most of the relatively small number of adult patrons who did not conform at least to some degree to a library rule appeared to be either mentally unstable or under the influence of alcohol. During a visit to the library on January 18, 1992, for instance, I saw a late middle-aged man (whose grandmother, judging from his age, had probably been dead for a number of years) pointing to a picture in a magazine, and apparently addressing everyone in the room in a voice that I heard distinctly from the other side, "My grandmother! Swear to God, it's my grandmother! I thought she lives around here!"

Another time, I found it very unsettling when an older man, who I thought at the time was senile, was staring at me very intently from across the room as I sat taking notes. He was cussing so loudly as he glared at me that I could clearly hear him. On only a few other occasions did I witness such an infraction of a library rule by an adult. A security guard later told me that such outbursts among adults only occurred about once a week.

It is perhaps significant to note that I considered these two men to be mentally imbalanced; adults who do not adjust their behavior to the rules of social settings are often considered as such. But not all adults who unknowingly break rules do so because they are mentally unbal-

anced. The branch librarian told me she found that some of the patrons, especially senior citizens, spoke very loudly because they could not hear.

There were a small number of adults who came to the Lake Crest Library while I was studying it who broke rules even though they seemed both in control of their mental faculties and aware that they were breaking rules. The few adults who engaged in this situationally inappropriate behavior usually tried to hide their actions behind "legitimate" activities. The branch librarian told me that some people whom she thought were homeless would sit and sometimes doze with an opened book in front of them because they knew, in her opinion, that as long as they were quiet, had a book open, and appeared to be reading, they were not likely to be asked to leave the library for loitering. On a few occasions I saw individuals who were dozing as they leaned over open books with their heads propped up in their hands or staring off into space for long stretches of time. Due to their tattered and disheveled condition, they appeared to be very poor and quite possibly homeless.

Children as a whole followed the rules specific to the library far less frequently than adults. I often heard children laughing loudly among themselves and calling out to each other across the room, or saw them running through the adult section while playing a form of hide and seek, pushing and shoving one another, or snatching a book or pencil out

of another's hand. According to one of the security guards, it was necessary for a member of the staff to approach an adult and ask him or her to stop engaging in an activity that they considered disruptive about twice a month. Children, however, were approached by the guard or other staff members several times a day and even asked to leave the library, although I never saw an adult being asked to leave. It did not happen that often.

Teenagers showed signs that they were more settled down and adjusted to the library culture than were younger children. I never saw, for example, teenagers running or shouting in the library although they often laughed or talked loudly. They too, along with many of the children, had learned concealment techniques like having books opened in front of them on the library table while they engaged in unauthorized activities such as visiting among friends.

As long as there were not "too many" children or teenagers creating disturbances in the library, they were not considered a problem. Staff could handle an occasional boisterous outburst with relative ease and without alarm. An attitude of tolerance and accommodation was predominant among staff and patrons. Often, minor infractions of the unwritten library rules were even allowed to continue without comment by other patrons or reprimand from the staff. As long as these incidents were isolated and did not seem to jeopardize the safety of other patrons or staff or

the use of the facility as a center of reading and learning by others, the violators posed little threat to the established order and other users did not demand that the staff rectify the situation. As the branch librarian told me, as long as none of the patrons seemed disturbed, the staff was often willing to ignore violations. Once, for example, two black boys who were squabbling over the use of a map program on the computer in the children's room knocked over a bookrack as they shoved each other and about 25 books crashed to the floor. The branch librarian rushed over, told them to put the books back and leave, which was the usual response when children were fighting. Although they put the books back they continued to play on the computer rather than leave, and the librarian did not insist that they go. No one in the room at the time seemed to be ruffled by the incident.

Another time I saw a poorly clad, unshaven man quietly sleeping on top of an opened book, right in front of the information desk. Yet he was not disturbed by the library staff the entire hour I was there. Perhaps if he been loudly snoring, or if he had bulky belongings that covered an entire table during a crowded time, he might have been awakened and even asked to go. As these examples show, the staff is, within limits, flexible in allowing library users to dictate the use of the library space according to the situation and context.

Sometimes, however, patrons' definitions of disruption differed. According to staff, adults complained most often about others talking too loudly, especially children, and next often about the offensive body odor of another. However, children most often do not complain about talking, but about another child touching or hitting them, and secondly about another child taking something from them. It is very rare, one guard said, that a child, even among those who are trying hard to study, would complain that others are talking too loudly. Apparently, they had a higher level of tolerance than adults for loud talking.

As a public library branch, the Lake Crest Library was designed to provide neighborhood residents with reading material and other information that could be accessed in a comfortable atmosphere which was conducive to concentration. It had also evolved in purpose to serve in a limited capacity as a community center and a center for learning. It was most often those who used the library in manners not aligned with these purposes that came into conflict with those who did use it for those purposes. Over the course of my observations I got the distinct impression that those using the library for "legitimate" purposes often felt they had more "right" to the space and wanted to protect that right against those who wanted to use this space to sleep, unpack and rearrange their belongings, or play with friends. It was the adult "regulars" sitting reading newspapers for

hours every day--who themselves had colonized this facility for their own, albeit socially acceptable, use--that were, according to several members of the library staff, the first to complain about the activities of others. They had gained and exercised what Lyn Lofland (1973) refers to as "proprietary rights."



## CHAPTER III

### CONFLICTING INTERESTS IN SPACE

#### Space Control in the Chicago Public Library System

During the spring of 1992, a list of rules was adopted by the Board of Directors of the Chicago Public Library for all the libraries in their system. Many of the informal rules of library behavior were transformed into official rules, as follows:

#### THE CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY

#### GUIDELINES GOVERNING THE USE OF THE LIBRARY

#### PLEASE DO NOT:

- Engage in any illegal activity or behavior
- Vandalize library facilities, equipment or materials
- Enter without shoes or shirt
- Bring in animals, except guide dogs
- Harass other library users or library staff (physical, sexual, or verbal abuse)
- Sell, solicit, panhandle, or loiter
- Distribute leaflets or post notices not authorized by the library administration
- Eat, drink, smoke, or sleep
- Leave children unattended
- Talk loudly or make noise that other library users can hear
- Bathe, shave, or wash clothes

- Bring in bulky items that take up excessive space
- Remove library materials from building without charging them out

PERSONS WHO FAIL TO OBSERVE THESE GUIDELINES MAY BE ASKED TO LEAVE THE BUILDING OR BE SUBJECT TO ARREST.

Suddenly, it seemed, the rules of "common sense" that had governed the Chicago Public Library System for so long were not so common that they could go without being explicitly stated. The underlying reason that these rules were made official, according to the Lake Crest branch librarian, was because there was a "homeless problem" at the main branch of the Chicago Public Library, which library officials did not want transferred to the new Harold Washington Library when it opened at the end of 1991. Formal rules were being set to safeguard the historically legitimate purposes of the library and the interests of the people who wished to use it for these purposes. Many of the rules set by the Board of Directors, such as the ones pertaining to sleeping, eating, and bathing, were particularly aimed against the kind of activities in which homeless people are likely to be engaged in the library and limited their use of this facility.

The implication of the term "public space" is that it is open for public use. While it may be considered by many Americans that all members of society have permission to use public space, it actually is not equally available to all citizens. Carol Brooks Gardener points out that events in

public places "are often marked by privilege, engineered for already empowered groups, and by sites where the expectations of advantaged groups are met and perpetuated" (1991, p. 260). Freedom in and control of public space, according to Carr et. al. (1992), is not evenly distributed throughout society because cultural restrictions and management policies limit access to public spaces and the ways in which facilities are used. This was certainly the case in the library system. Management policies had just officially been established for the implicit purpose of limiting use of the library by a particular group of people.

#### Space Invaders at the Lake Crest Library

While a few homeless people frequented the Lake Crest Library during the time I studied it, they were not the population that posed the primary concern regarding behavior for the staff and many of its users. The group that caused the most trouble was the boisterous black school children who flocked to the library on weekday afternoons and evenings, hanging out with their friends, migrating from table to table to talk to other children, playing various forms of "tag," and often becoming rowdy as they laughed and joked together, knocking over chairs as they teased each other and shoved each other. According to the library staff, who had to respond to the complaints of other library users, these children were highly disruptive. Especially

for the established group of adult "regulars," they were the space invaders.

Concerns about the boisterous behavior of many of the children had, to a lesser degree, been present for a number of years and the Lake Crest staff had, over time, developed a set of rules for children that was designed specifically to limit or control their activities. When I first began to visit the library, the staff often told the children that there could not be more than four children at a table, that they had to sit only on the children's side, and that they had to stay seated with a book open in front of them. They were also told that if a member of the staff found it necessary to warn a child three times not to break one of these or the more general rules of the library (such as no loud talking) they would have to leave the library.

However, early in the spring of 1992, library staff found these rules insufficient to control the behavior of all of the disruptive children in the library. The sheer number of children who were not studying in this space had increased the combined volume and level of activity to new heights. The security guard with whom I spoke on March 6, 1992 told me, "this library has become transformed by [the children]. This isn't a library anymore, it's a social club!" On March 9, the branch librarian reported, "we have people who are afraid to come in here. Literally, they've told me that." In response to this situation, "new rules"

for children were implemented on March 16, 1992. Devised by the branch librarian and enforced primarily by the two security guards employed at that time, these rules went beyond restricting children's use of space in the library and greatly restricted access to the library itself.

The new rules required that elementary school-aged children who were unaccompanied by an adult had to sign a register upon entry and sign out upon exit. They were allowed to stay in the library no longer than two hours and if they left, they could not return. In addition, they could stay no later than 6:30 P.M., unless it was believed by the library staff that they were "really studying." Although high school children were not subject to these rules, they were required to sit exclusively on the adults' side of the library.

The immediate effect of this rule was that, inside, the library became a quieter space. Outside on the street however, ten to twenty children gathered in protest, chanting, banging on cars parked in front of the library, and occasionally banging on the windows and doors of the library itself. Many of the children tested the rules and tried to sneak in past the guards (I heard one using the ploy that he needed to use the drinking fountain) or stay past their allotted time limit, but once discovered, they were ejected by the guard and re-joined the children on the street. The staff called the police several times to break up the crowd

of children or respond to related disturbances in the first week after the new rules were put into effect. By the beginning of the next week, however, the size of the group dwindled and eventually disappeared.

None of the other patrons, not even the parents, complained to the staff about the enforcement of these rules. According to several of the staff members, the adult patrons with whom they had discussed this issue all seemed pleased. But the staff at the Lake Crest Library was clearly emotionally torn by their actions. The pain was apparent in the eyes of the branch librarian as she told me the story of one black boy about seven or eight years-old who returned to the library several times a night those first few weeks, trying to get in past the security guard. "He misses us," she said on March 25, 1992. "He wants to come in and stay here. I ask him why he doesn't want to go home and he says its boring, there's nothing to do. I don't know what goes on there." Still, the staff members were glad to have order restored to a level in which they were comfortable. In one telling comment that same night, the branch librarian said is a tone of relief, "now, it's more like a *real* library!"

As time went on, fewer children came to the library. "Where do you suppose they are?" I asked one of the clerks at the end of March.

"On the street," she replied. At that point, their only remaining chance to be allowed into the library was to fit in, if, indeed, they wanted to.

On March 30, 1992, 64 children had signed into the library between 2:30 and 6:30 P.M., and by April 14, only 34 children had come in during this same time-frame. By summer of 1992, it was no longer necessary to enforce these rules; the staff did not perceive a need to do so. When school started again in the fall and throughout the winter and spring of 1993, the library staff with whom I spoke felt there was still no need to enforce the "new rules." The number of children coming to the library, especially those who had been considered disruptive, had been greatly reduced.

#### Trying to Make People Fit into Space

That children's access to the library was so severely limited during the spring of 1992 was an extreme response of the staff to what they considered a crisis situation. Ordinarily, the most common response of the staff and other patrons to children they considered disruptive was to try to make them adjust and fit into the library space, to modify their behavior by interesting the children in reading or studying in the library and thus socializing them into the library culture.

As previously mentioned, fewer teenagers disrupt the relatively quiet space in the Lake Crest Library than children, and fewer adults are disruptive than teenagers. This might indicate that a process of learning is taking place through which many library patrons, as they grow older, learn how they are expected to behave in the library and conform to that standard, so that by the time they are adults they have the "common sense" that seems to dictate behavior in this public place. As I watched and listened in the Lake Crest Library, I witnessed a steady stream of efforts, from parents (when they were present), security guards, clerks, other patrons, tutors, and even other children to indoctrinate children to their accepted standards of behavior.

Although the primary function of the security guards was to maintain order in the library and they did this sometimes strictly through control by enforcing the rules, they often did so by expressing expectations. One said, with an air of righteous indignation to two boys who were walking from table to table greeting the children sitting there, "This is a *library!* People are supposed to *read* here!" This method was at least immediately as effective in producing desired results as the time in which this same guard bellowed, "sit down and be quiet!" to a different set of boys. In both cases, the children went back to the books open on another table and sat down in front of them.



The volunteer tutors who came in to help children with their homework also reminded children of how they were expected to behave in the library. I once heard a tutor interrupt the story she was reading to a child three times to reprimand two other boys, first saying, "no fighting in the library," then, "no running in the library," and finally, "no fooling around in the library."

Parents or other adult guardians were also engaged in this process of education. Just as I was leaving one Saturday afternoon I overheard a young blond white woman telling a black child as she held his hand at the entrance to the children's room, "this is the children's side. Now, you have to be very quiet in here. I'm going to be just over there on the other side, okay?"

In addition, adult patrons seemingly unrelated to the children would occasionally voice expectations directly to children. As I watched one evening, a middle-aged black woman reached out and tried to snatch the arm of a black child who was running through the adults' room, while firmly ordering him, "stop running around in here! Go get some books and sit down and read them or go outside if you want to run around!"

It was not always adults who acted as channels through which expectations regarding behavior were communicated and learned. Often, peers took on this role. One evening, while sitting next to a table where three Hispanic teenage

boys were sitting, I heard one tell another "you can't have candy in the library" and saw, out of the corner of my eye, the one to whom he was talking quickly shove something beneath the notebook papers in front of him.

Many of the "disruptive" children already knew what was expected of them. I found out in speaking with them, that they could quickly cite library rules without difficulty. It was not that they had not yet learned the rules of the library, they simply were not conforming to them. One security guard with whom I spoke believed that up to 90% of the children (who were coming into the library just before the "new rules" were enforced in 1992) would never really conform to the rules of the library or other public places. He told me on March 5, 1992, that the library was "just a band-aid" for them, and that, once these children were a little older, they would "find some other kind of trouble to get into and they just won't come back." Because he believed that behavior could not really be modified at the library, he did not also try to help the children learn or adjust to the library culture. He perceived their behavior as proof of his expectation.

In response to his tight control, the children often showed resistance, challenging the guard and asking such questions as, "Why are you always messin' with someone?" Some young patrons disregarded or rebelled against his strict enforcement of the rules because they felt as one of

them told me, that he was being unreasonable. It was to him, not any other of the staff, that I heard them hurling curse words as they gathered in front of the library in protest of the "new rules" in March of 1992.

It is quite possible, as the security guard predicted, that many of the children will not return to the library. Even before the "new rules" were enforced, there were fewer black teens who frequented the library than elementary school-aged children, and fewer black adults than teens. Most of the library staff and, especially, the volunteer tutors, however, believed that some of these children "still have a chance" to become acceptable participants in the library culture, and by implication, the society that the library represents. One of the tutors with whom I spoke estimated that fully 50% of the children who come to the library are motivated to study and just needed assistance in doing so. As a result of the tutors' assistance with children's homework, both tutors and the branch librarian had noted positive results in the working habits of these children while they were at the library. One of the tutors said they had quieted down and were more respectful of other children's need not to be disturbed when they wanted to read or study. The branch librarian said that some of the tutored children had received scholastic awards at their school.

To the extent that the children became interested in using the library as a place of reading and learning, the behavior of the children was modified to acceptable levels and they were allowed to stay in the library for long periods of time. I noted that when given the choice to sit down with a book or leave, even the children who were labeled as disruptive would usually sit down with a book. Often, I watched them flip through these books, and as they paused on a page now and then, I thought I saw a spark of interest in their eyes. The role of the volunteer tutors in drawing out this interest may be the greatest key in not only controlling behavior that is considered disruptive by the library standards, but in changing it. For the lives of the Lake Crest children, developing more of an interest in reading and learning had profound implications, not only for the time when they will be adults, but immediately; it meant the difference between their being allowed to stay in a relatively safe, warm environment and being banished to the relatively unsafe, cold environment of the streets.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

This study of the role of space in everyday social life is a contribution to the growing body of observations that, like various pieces of a multi-dimensional puzzle, may be pieced together for a more complete understanding of the sociology of space.

The setting of the Lake Crest Library is like many other libraries in urban neighborhoods throughout the country (Lincoln, 1984). In economically declining cities, community facilities are shrinking and public libraries are some of the few remaining places that are still open to the public. In the absence of other public places, people bring their various needs to the public library and try to use what they find there to fill those needs. Some of the ways in which they use the library are unorthodox. In addition, these facilities are barely sufficient to serve traditional uses. The staff tries to defend the historically based functions of the library, fearing that they may be considerably changed or lost altogether. Traditional users of this space are also inclined to protect it from change. In a society where there is only so much space, those who do not "fit in" are excluded. In the case of the Lake Crest

Library, those who lost in the contest for space were mostly children.

When I first began observing people in the Lake Crest Library, I was not looking for issues concerning space, I was simply watching patterns of behavior. These issues only became apparent to me as I watched the struggles of children trying to secure a niche for themselves in this public place. That space was a significant issue only became apparent as I heard and was told about accusations of misconduct--behavior that, in another spatial context, may have been differently interpreted. Finally, the significance of space was clearly echoed back to me in the voice of the library associate who told me during an interview on August 12, 1992:

They're fighting for some space. They're asking for some space to do what they want to do in that library. That's what it is. People are using the library for a lot of different functions and it's the conflict of those functions, probably as much as anything else, rather than personalities, that causes the problems.

The children of the Lake Crest Library were not necessarily "bad" children, most of their behavior was simply inappropriate for the library setting. As pointed out by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, "when people work together for a common cause, one man does not deprive the other of space; rather he increases it for his colleague by giving him support." But competing interests can make the same space seem crowded and when conflicting activities leave others standing in our way, "they are rarely presumed innocent"

(1977, p. 64). The children of the Lake Crest Library were probably not presumed innocent by the patrons who complained about them, the security guard whose only interest was in controlling them, or even by some of the tutors who benevolently tried to change them.

To have seen the solution for this situation as a need to repress or change the children, to control or modify their behavior, is to consider the children at fault. Certainly there were times when these children needed to read and study. But there were also times when they needed to engage physical and social activity. That they did not have adequate space in which play was not their fault. The individual "victims" of the social system were being blamed for inadequacies of the system (see Ryan, 1976).

It was not necessarily the responsibility of the Lake Crest Library to provide space for children to play, however, even if adequate space were there. Expanding the library to make it large enough for everyone or partitioning it off in ways that would suit everyone's needs, that is, to dramatically change the function of the library, was not necessarily the solution to the problem of adequate public space, either. Other kinds of public spaces were needed.

Yet as much as the space in the library impacted on the residents of the Lake Crest neighborhood both in providing opportunities to engage in some types of activities and limiting opportunities to engage in others, the needs of the

neighborhood residents impacted on the library space and significantly defined its use. As the library adapted to the needs of many members of the community by providing ESL and GED classes, for example, it became, in addition to its basic purpose, a center for learning. Further establishing the library as a center for learning was the volunteer tutoring program, although part of the underlying purpose of this program was to modify the behavior of boisterous children who did not compatibly fit into this space. The space and its socially ascribed meanings acted back on them.

Why does it matter what goes on in the public library? Some social scientists believe, after all, that what happens in public spaces has relatively little impact on society (Lofland, 1989). They believe that where important differences occur are at the largest or smallest units of society; either at the level of institutional structures or the level of family arrangements. A growing number of sociologists suspect otherwise. As I watched what went on in the Lake Crest Library, I began to feel this way, too. The drama of social life, from some of its most simple to its most complex implications, was being played out among those library shelves and tables. It is not only the problems of society that manifest themselves there, but possibly some of the solutions as well.



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## VITA

Ms. Annette Prosterman, daughter of Doris Powell Prosterman and Jerome Prosterman, was born in Peoria, Illinois. She received a Bachelor of Philosophy degree with a major in sociology from Northwestern University in 1989. The following year, Ms. Prosterman began a Master of Arts program through the Department of Sociology at Loyola University of Chicago, where she is continuing to study toward a Doctorate degree.

APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Annette Prosterman has been read and approved by the following Committee:

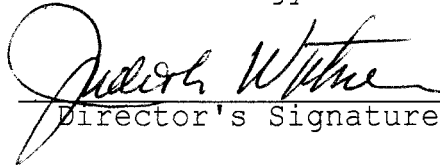
Dr. Judith Wittner  
Professor, Sociology, Loyola University

Dr. Talmidge Wright  
Professor, Sociology, Loyola University

The final copies have been examined by the Director of this thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and the thesis is now given approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The thesis is therefore accepted in fulfillment of the master's thesis requirement in sociology.

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Date

  
Director's Signature