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## Making Third Spaces Safe Spaces: How Trauma-Informed Care Informs Librarianship<sup>1</sup>

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*Libraries are increasingly aware that patrons have experienced traumas related to social, economic, racial, and political factors. With the 2020 pandemic came an increase in vulnerable populations and library patrons. As a result, “Trauma-informed Care” (TIC) and “third spaces” in libraries emerged. Ray Oldenburg defined “third space” as neutral space separate from home and work where we build connections and have a good time. At the same time, TIC promotes person-centered, culturally aware, and strengths-based interaction. This paper provides a brief overview of TIC and “third spaces” in libraries and special collections, and shares strategies to follow to create a safe, inclusive, and supportive environments in library spaces.*

### Introduction

Conversations surrounding libraries frequently assert that they are open to everyone. Yet this viewpoint fails to acknowledge the harsh truth that libraries, being institutions, can cause both intentional and unintentional harm to the populations they aim to assist. This article explores the history of libraries, using the term “libraries” to refer to both public and special collections for brevity. It discusses libraries as a “third place,” a term often interchangeable with “third space.” The article will examine the essential elements of safety that shape the perception of libraries as “safe spaces,” as well as the unintentional harm that libraries and librarians may inflict. Ultimately, it will emphasize how adopting trauma-informed care can help libraries create a genuinely inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone. It is important to note that while the terms “third place” and “third space” are related, they are distinct concepts that will be elaborated upon in this piece.

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1. A version of this article was presented by the author, under the title, “Making Third Spaces Safe Spaces: How Trauma-Informed Care Informs Librarianship,” as part of the Power of New Voices (PONY) session at the RBMS 2024 conference. PONY is an annual conference session featuring the work of early-career individuals, defined as five years post-Master’s. Panelists were contacted to submit essays to *RBM*. Essays reflect the brevity of the lightning talk format.

This article originated from an active shooter incident on the university campus where I work. Although special collections were not the location of the incident, they nonetheless constituted an unintended casualty. The archive, often called the “jewel of the campus,” is a respected hall of learning where students, prospective students, and visiting scholars come to study, research, and acquire knowledge. However, after the event, something changed. Researcher numbers declined, tours were canceled, and remote work increased—the library was no longer physically, psychologically, or socially safe for visitors or staff. This situation led me to question what it means when the “library as a place,” or library safety is compromised, and how we can reaffirm the library as safe once more.

### The Library as a Third Place

Libraries have shifted from a traditional “book-centric” definition to a more progressive “service-centric” approach. In contemporary discussions, libraries serve more as community centers and gathering places than merely as book depositories, including some special collections. However, at their inception, libraries were not intended to be community centers; instead, they were meant to help foster “an intelligent and educated electorate [which] is essential to a democracy, and in the great system of public education, which they foresaw, the public library was to be a true ‘people’s university.’”<sup>2</sup> Over time, libraries have increasingly become viewed as “third places.” Oldenburg defined “third place” as a “generic designation for a great variety of public places that have the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.”<sup>3</sup> “Third places” must be: cheap or free; close to home or work so that you can go there regularly; amenable to conversation; a second home for old friends and new; not required to be there or restricted by time; and playful.<sup>4</sup>

Oldenburg did not view libraries as “third places” because of the existing structure and social conditions at the time of his writing; however, libraries now fit into these categories more than ever. They are at the forefront of addressing numerous issues, including homelessness, drug addiction, natural disasters, and more. Oldenburg’s work significantly shaped the idea of libraries as community spaces, even if not directly referenced. For example, an article in *Social Work Today* noted, “The notion of libraries as a central gathering place for the community is not new.”<sup>5</sup> Wood

2. Jesse Hauk Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England 1629–1855* (University of Chicago Press, 1949).

3. Anne Hendershott, “Review of *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*, by Ray Oldenburg,” *Contemporary Sociology* 20, no. 1 (1991): 78–79, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2072095>.

4. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Berkshire Publishing Group LLC, 2023).

5. Christiane Petrin Lambert, “Libraries and Social Workers—Perfect Partners,” *Social Work Today* 20, no. 2 (2020): 20.

suggests that “libraries meet the definition of third place in its purest form. . . .”<sup>6</sup> In 2002, Demas and Scherer similarly stated that libraries are “transcendent spaces,” and much like third places, they “create opportunities for people who do not necessarily travel in the same disciplinary, social, political, or economic circles to frequently meet and greet each other.”<sup>7</sup> Libraries, academic and public, and special collections may serve different purposes and cater to various populations but, fundamentally, they both embody the concepts of “third places” and “transcendent spaces.” They serve as gathering spaces for public and private researchers, students, and the public to safely interact with each other, materials, and librarians.

### Safeties and Safe Places

When discussing the evolution of libraries as “third spaces,” it’s essential to establish an environment where individuals feel safe.<sup>8</sup> Physical, psychological, cultural, moral, and social safeties all make libraries “safe spaces” and, in turn, represent “third places.” In library contexts, one or several of these safeties may exist simultaneously. Library rules, guidelines, and regulations typically uphold physical safety concerns for patrons, staff, and materials. Psychological safety is “the ability to feel secure with oneself, to depend on one’s own capacity to protect against destructive impulses originating from within or from others, and to remain safe from harm.”<sup>9</sup> Psychological safety for patrons comes from customer service and staff interactions. For library staff, psychological safety hinges on administration support. Cultural safety is “the overall experience of an individual’s ability to live, promote, honor, and explore their family’s cultural heritage.”<sup>10</sup> Staff education, as well as prioritizing—and elevating—marginalized voices, help promote cultural safety. A morally safe environment fosters healthy debate, and encourages traits like diversity, courage, compassion, and trust. It also removes toxic and punitive mindsets and environments, positively affecting staff and patrons. Social safety is “feeling safe with other people in group, public, or private settings ... [that] signifies a sense of security where individuals feel cared for and trusted.”<sup>11</sup> Social safety is a fundamental principle in libraries because it ensures that all individuals feel welcome, secure, and respected while using the available resources and services.

It is critical to highlight the role of “familiar strangers” in establishing the library as a “safe space.” Introduced by Milgram in 1972, a familiar stranger is someone you frequently encounter in a specific setting but do not interact with or know

6. Emma Wood, “Libraries Full Circle: The Cross Section of Community, the Public Sphere, and Third Place,” *Public Library Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2020): 144–166, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2020.1737491>.

7. Sam Demas and Jeffrey A. Scherer, “Esprit De Place,” *American Libraries* 33, no. 4 (2002): 65–68.

8. Brian Sturm, “How ‘Safe’ Should Libraries Be?,” *North Carolina Libraries* 63, no. 1 (2005): 23–24.

9. Ally Jamieson, “SWIS Trauma-Informed Practices: 4 Safety’s 1 - AMSSA,” SWIS Trauma-Informed Practices: 4 Safety’s, 2025, 1–7, <https://www.amssa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/SWIS-Trauma-Informed-Practices-Safety-Activity-and-Handout.pdf>

10. Jamieson, “SWIS Trauma-Informed.”

11. Rebecca Tolley, *A Trauma-Informed Approach to Library Services* (ALA Editions, 2020), 56.

personally. Paulos refined the term, suggesting that a familiar stranger: “(1) must be observed, (2) repeatedly, and (3) without any interaction.”<sup>12</sup> Patrons may recognize and become familiar with librarians and library staff members they frequently see. The librarian-as-familiar-stranger creates a friendly and safe environment for visitors, reducing negative experiences. Familiar strangers help “maximize the human potential for growth, self-exploration, mutual co-operation, nurturing of the young, artistic endeavors, or creative expression and exploration.”<sup>13</sup> Familiar strangers highlight the importance of libraries and special collections in fostering individual and community development. These institutions provide opportunities for engagement, education, research, and creativity, serving as information sources and drivers of human potential. They demonstrate their value by facilitating intellectual and social growth.

### **Library Safety Is Disturbed**

Libraries offer secure environments and act as distinctive information and community hubs at the crossroads of public and government spaces. However, what occurs when the library fails to provide a “safe” environment/“third space,” thereby harming a patron? A library could unintentionally—or intentionally—harm a patron, through “sarcasm, condescension, public humiliation, negative tones of voice and body language, inconsistent rules, procedures, and policies, favoritism, infantilization, gaslighting, shaming, and blaming, among others” when interacting with patrons.<sup>14</sup>

While libraries often strive to be inclusive and welcoming, they sometimes fail. The United States has a legacy of racial discrimination that racial minorities face in spaces such as libraries. The issue of what defines “safe” is nuanced; for specific populations, heavily policed and surveilled areas and reading rooms may feel unsafe, if not deadly. Libraries serving unhoused populations enacted problematic “odor policies” and “civility campaigns” that aim to “teach” the “homeless, children, and others how to behave.”<sup>15</sup> Children and teens are often viewed as “problem patrons” and “an irritant to public library staff.”<sup>16</sup> Special collections and archives frequently enforce rules and regulations—such as strict reading room policies, complex request procedures, and limited hours—that can unintentionally exclude non-academic users. These policies deprive users of library conveniences and are harmful. As a profession, we must acknowledge these failures to progress.

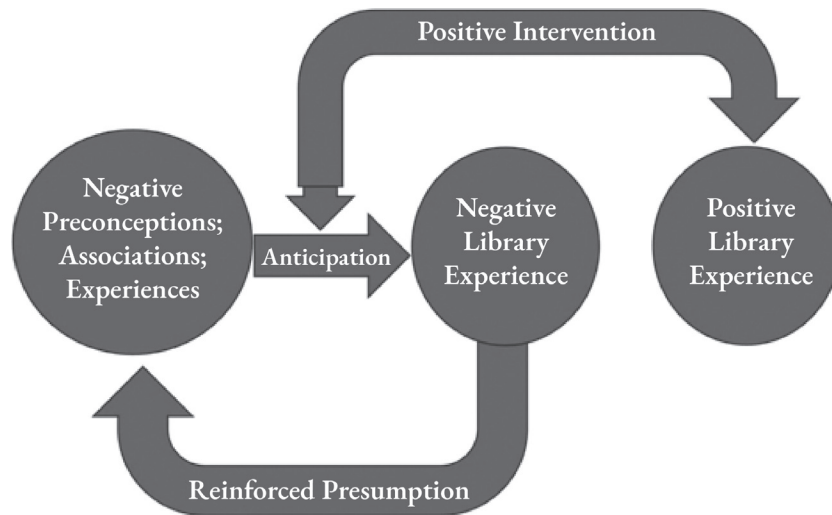
12. Eric Paulos and Elizabeth Goodman, “The Familiar Stranger: Anxiety, Comfort, and Play in Public Places,” (2004): 1, [http://www.paulos.net/papers/2004/Familiar%20Stranger%20\(CHI%202004\).pdf](http://www.paulos.net/papers/2004/Familiar%20Stranger%20(CHI%202004).pdf)

13. Paulos and Goodman. “The Familiar Stranger.”

14. Tolley, *A Trauma-Informed Approach*.

15. John Gehner, “Are Public Libraries Criminalizing Poor People?” Hunger Homelessness Poverty Task Force SRRTALA, September 12, 2016, <https://hhptf.org/article/2/are-public-libraries-criminalizing-poor-people/>

16. Mary K. Chelton, “The ‘Problem Patron’ Public Libraries Created,” *The Reference Librarian* 36, no. 75–76 (2002): 23–32, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J120v36n75\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/J120v36n75_04).

**FIGURE 1****The Library Trauma Cycle**

When libraries and librarians cause harm, we risk sending patrons into a dangerous cycle, potentially causing them to avoid the library altogether—a phenomenon known as the “Library Trauma Cycle” (see Figure 1). Developed by the author and refined from an earlier model by Dudak and Yeon, this framework shows the cycle when libraries validate a patron’s negative beliefs and experiences.<sup>17</sup>

This model visually represents a feedback loop related to all library experiences, primarily focusing on how negative preconceptions can shape future interactions and how positive interventions can break the cycle. Preconceived notions about libraries stem from past experiences, cultural influences, or misinformation, leading to reluctance, anxiety, or disinterest. This mindset may create a self-fulfilling prophecy, where individuals interpret experiences to confirm their hostile expectations. These experiences reinforce unfavorable beliefs, perpetuating avoidance of library resources. Conversely, positive interventions—such as welcoming staff, engaging programs, or improved environments—can disrupt this cycle, offering opportunities for more positive experiences. These interventions can reshape perceptions and promote ongoing positive engagement. The model highlights the necessity of breaking negative feedback loops, to create welcoming and constructive library experiences. We should implement positive interventions and practices, such as trauma-informed care (TIC), to interrupt this cycle for patrons.

17. Jieun Yeon and Leah T. Dudak, “Potential for Trauma in Public Libraries Experiencing Book Banning and Material Challenges,” *Public Library Quarterly* (December 17, 2024): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2024.2442215>: 16.

## Libraries and Trauma-Informed Care

To reduce the risk of harm and injury, libraries must adapt services to serve their communities within these limitations. TIC is a necessary skill set for public service, and a psychological framework where “systems and services . . . have thoroughly incorporated an understanding of trauma, including its consequences and the conditions that enhance healing, in all aspects of service delivery.”<sup>18</sup> TIC promotes person-centered, culturally aware, and strength-based interactions, which are essential for delivering effective services. The TIC framework emphasizes safety, transparency, and peer support as vital components of care and services. By adopting this framework, libraries can serve the community as “third spaces” and “safe spaces.”

## Conclusion

Over time, libraries have become known as “third spaces,” due to their unique characteristics and role as community centers. They are also recognized as “safe spaces,” because they often manifest several safeties. However, libraries exist at a unique intersection of public and institutional spaces; they must operate under restrictions and limitations that can negatively impact patrons through intentional and unintentional actions, such as policies, defunding, book bans, attacks on free access, and more. When patrons are harmed in a library setting, the library as a “safe space” and a “third space” is disrupted, potentially pushing patrons into the Library Trauma Cycle. To embody the qualities of a “safe space” and a “third space,” libraries must integrate TIC at a structural level, to cultivate trust and confidence in the library as a haven. Even small steps toward implementing TIC principles of safety, trustworthiness, and collaboration can positively impact patrons and help them break free from the Library Trauma Cycle and enter a more positive one.

As a profession, what steps should we take to help patrons break the cycle? Structural change is long and arduous, but small actions can contribute significantly. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s Four R’s—realize, recognize, respond, and resist—create a strategic guide for steps we can take to restore our libraries as safe.<sup>19</sup> We can reaffirm and reclaim our spaces by: realizing how trauma and harm affect individuals, communities, and organizations; recognizing signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, staff, and others; responding with trauma-informed policies and practices; and resisting actions that harm patrons and visitors.

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18. Roger D. Fallot and Maxine Harris, “Trauma-Informed Approaches to Systems of Care,” *Trauma Psychology Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (2008): 6–7.

19. Tolley, *A Trauma-Informed Approach*, 18–19.