

Spiritual needs and modern librarianship: a survey of practising librarians in a Western context

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Abstract

Introduction. *This study aimed to highlight the perceptions of spiritual needs in modern librarianship through a survey administered amongst practising librarians primarily in the USA and UK. In addition, this study contributes to the conceptualisation of the spiritual in library settings and discussions on service provision within Western libraries.*

Methods. *We used a mixed-methods approach which collected quantitative and qualitative data through one survey.*

Analysis. *We analysed the responses through descriptive statistics and thematic coding.*

Results. *Librarians connected spiritual needs with humanness, emotions, wellbeing, religion and culture. Spiritual needs associated with love/belonging/respect and positivity/gratitude/hope/peace were perceived more often than those associated with resolution/death and the divine. The need to perform religious/ spiritual rituals and participate in religious/spiritual services was regarded as the least important to consider in modern librarianship.*

Conclusions. *Our findings 1) Support prior research that conceptualises modern libraries as spaces for contemplation and spirituality; 2) Provide an account of how librarians understand the concept of spiritual needs; 3) Indicate librarians' perceptions of the prevalence of spiritual needs amongst library patrons; 4) Highlight the perceived importance of considering spiritual needs in modern libraries.*

Keywords: *Spiritual needs, surveys, libraries*

Introduction

Several authors have recently discussed spiritual needs and practices in library and information science. For example, Pyati (2019) argued for conceptualising the public library as a contemplative space. Similarly, Gorichanaz (2021) envisaged an intersection of information institutions and contemplative institutions. Moreover, Moniz et al. (2016) suggested practising mindfulness-based stress reduction to improve librarians' joy and quality of life and Block and Proctor (2020) recommended using meditation and visualisation techniques to enhance librarian-patron interactions.

Collectively, these works help identify a place for contemplation and spirituality in libraries and information institutions. However, we lack accounts of how spiritual needs and practices are viewed by practising librarians. Missing also are studies that help empirically appraise the importance of considering spiritual needs in modern librarianship.

To this end, our study aimed to highlight the perceptions and opinions of librarians regarding popular needs and practices in the domain of contemplation and spirituality. The findings: 1) Support prior research that conceptualises modern libraries as spaces for contemplation and spirituality; 2) Provide an account of how librarians understand the concept of spiritual needs; 3) Indicate librarians' perceptions of the prevalence of spiritual needs amongst library patrons; 4) Highlight the perceived importance of considering spiritual needs in modern libraries.

Background

Traditionally encapsulated within religious values and belief systems, spiritual needs and practices may be ordinarily considered the realm of organised religion. However, with a considerable rise in non-institutionalised spirituality, spiritual needs and practices are often encountered outside formalised religious institutions in contemporary Euro-American society (van der Veer, 2009). These needs may be associated with love, peace, security, belonging, forgiveness, and meaning and purpose in life and popular spiritual practices may take the form of prayer, meditation, mindfulness, and yoga.

Recently, information scholars have highlighted the popularity of yoga and mindfulness programs in modern libraries (e.g. Lenstra, 2017; Samson, 2021). In addition, library professionals have frequently observed their patrons engaged in prayer and meditation in a variety of library spaces (Riehman-Murphy and Mross, 2019). Moreover, library and information science educators have illustrated the usefulness of meditation sessions in university classrooms (e.g. Hartel et al., 2017). However, studies that provide an account of how practising librarians and information professionals view these needs and practices are yet to be carried out.

Outside library research, spiritual needs have been studied in nursing, healthcare, and palliative care (Murray et al., 2004; Handzo and Koenig, 2004; Delgado, 2005; Hampton et al., 2007; Nixon et al., 2013; Stephenson and Berry, 2015; Nissen et al., 2021). In these disciplines, scholars and practitioners rely on standardised instruments to evaluate the prevalence of various spiritual needs amongst individual patients. Some examples include the Patients' Spiritual Needs Assessment Scale (PSNAS), Spiritual Needs Questionnaire (SpNQ), the Spiritual Needs Survey and Spiritual Needs Assessment for Patients (SNAP) (Monod et al., 2011; Seddigh et al., 2016; Nissen et al., 2020). These instruments typically take the form of surveys and questionnaires and may prove helpful in our attempts to understand how practising librarians view the concept of spiritual needs.

Research Questions

In this study, we gathered the perceptions and opinions of practising librarians to explore three main questions:

1. What are librarians' perceptions of the prevalence of spiritual needs amongst library patrons?
2. What spiritual needs do librarians feel important to consider when providing resources and services at a library?

3. What are librarians' views regarding spiritual needs in modern librarianship?

Method

Our study used a mixed-methods approach that operationalised an adapted version of a Spiritual Needs Survey developed by Galek et al. (2005). We collected quantitative and qualitative data through one survey designed to discover the perceived prevalence and importance of spiritual needs in modern libraries and collect the attitudes and opinions held by librarians regarding spiritual needs and library provision.

The Spiritual Needs Survey

The Spiritual Needs Survey was created through extensive analysis based on twelve qualitative, seven quantitative, and three theoretical studies (Seddigh et al., 2016). The survey comprises 29 spiritual needs categorised using the constructs of love/belonging/respect; divine; positivity/gratitude/hope/peace; meaning and purpose; morality and ethics; appreciation of beauty; and resolution/death. Each construct is further connected with questions designed to quantitatively evaluate the prevalence and importance of spiritual needs in hospitalised patients through self-assessment (Galek et al., 2005).

Study Survey Design

We adapted the Spiritual Needs Survey for use in our study by excluding two needs specific to a medical context and re-presenting the remaining 27 needs in the third person. We then embedded the reduced survey into our survey that first asked two closed-ended and one open-ended question:

Q1) During your time as a library and information professional, how often have library users, either directly or indirectly, expressed the following spiritual needs?

Q2) Is it important for professionals to consider the following spiritual needs when providing resources and services at a library or information centre?

Q3) These needs have been studied in the contexts of positive psychology, nursing and healthcare. Do you think they have a place in library provision? Please provide any personal thoughts or experiences.

In the first question, we asked participants to rate the prevalence of 27 spiritual needs amongst library patrons using a Likert scale of often, occasionally, rarely and never. In the second question, we presented the list of 27 spiritual needs again and asked participants to rate the importance of considering each need on a scale of definitely yes, perhaps yes, perhaps not, definitely not and no opinion. Finally, we provided participants with a free-text essay box for the third question to gather rich and animated responses.

To focus our study on librarians as professionals rather than individuals, we restricted our demographic questions to the type of library and current country of work:

Q4) What kind of libraries have you worked in? (academic, public, school, special, other, none)

Q5) What country do you currently work in?

Sample

We built our account through coherent geographical groupings, starting with the USA, UK and Canada, initially focussing on Western settings with similar professional training, later studies will widen to other contexts and regions.

After gaining approval from our Ethical Review Board, we administered the survey through the following electronic mailing lists chosen for their high activity and popularity amongst the community of practising library and information professionals:

1. The American Library Association (ALA) electronic discussion lists (several lists from lists.ala.org)
2. The lis-link Jiscmail list, A general library and information science list for news and discussion in the UK (lis-link@jiscmail.ac.uk)
3. The Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries list (abtapl@jiscmail.ac.uk)
4. The lis-research support list, intended for librarians in universities, colleges of higher education and research institutions in the UK (lis-researchsupport@jiscmail.ac.uk)
5. The OCLC (founded as the Ohio College Library centre) global library cooperative list for public librarians (publib@oclelists.org)
6. The Canadian Library and Information Science Discussion forum (bibcanlib-l@listserv.lac-bac.gc.ca)
7. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) general discussion list for the international library and information community (ifla-l@iflalists.org)
8. The IFLA forum for discussion on Public Library issues (publib@iflalists.org).

Analysis

We quantitatively analysed the responses to the closed-ended questions Q1 and Q2 using descriptive statistics. To analyse the open-ended question Q3, we first separated each response into smaller sentences to understand the nature of the collected data. We then used inductive thematic coding to understand librarians' views by looking for answers to two broad questions –How do librarians view spiritual needs? And should spiritual needs be considered in modern librarianship?

Limitations

Due to the self-selecting nature of the survey response, we cannot claim that the responses are representative of the community of librarians as a whole. Instead, the responses indicate the kinds of attitudes and opinions held amongst librarians regarding spiritual needs. In addition, the survey primarily gathered responses from two Western countries only, and cultural and professional attitudes to the spiritual may differ in other parts of the world. Therefore our claims are limited to these countries rather than librarianship in general.

Results

The survey gathered 150 completed responses and 131 partial responses (n=281).

What country do you currently work in? (Q5, n=141)

Of those who provided a location, 89 currently worked in the USA, 32 worked in the UK and 6 worked in Canada.

Additionally, 14 respondents worked in other westernised countries worldwide, several of which were librarians in countries with reciprocal arrangements with professional accreditation bodies in the USA and UK. Since the inclusion of these responses did not warrant the creation of additional categories

when analysing both qualitative and quantitative data. We, therefore, did not exclude the 14 responses from librarians working in other westernised countries.

What kind of libraries have you worked in? (academic, public, school, special, other, none) (Q4, n=144)

Of those who responded to the question on library experience, all respondents had some form of practical library experience. 112 respondents had worked in academic libraries, 66 in public libraries, 25 in special libraries, 18 in school libraries and 8 in other libraries.

During your time as a library and information professional, how often have library users, either directly or indirectly, expressed the following spiritual needs? (Q1, n=165)

Our first closed-ended question was regarding the perceived prevalence of spiritual needs amongst library patrons.

The responses to this question (shown in Table 1) revealed that although some spiritual needs were perceived significantly more often than others, practising librarians and information professionals perceived all spiritual needs included in our survey to be prevalent in modern libraries.

Librarians felt that patrons expressed spiritual needs associated with love/belonging/respect and positivity/gratitude/hope/peace more often than those associated with resolution/death and the divine.

A majority of librarians indicated that patrons expressed the need to have a quiet space to meditate or reflect more often than the need to read religious or spiritual material. Moreover, the need for kindness and compassion was the most frequently perceived spiritual need.

Finally, librarians occasionally perceived spiritual needs associated with the divine, meaning and purpose, morality, and ethics.

Construct	Spiritual Need	Often	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Love/belonging/respect	For kindness and compassion	71	59	25	10
Positivity/gratitude/ hope/peace	To keep a positive outlook	61	61	25	17
Positivity/gratitude/ hope/peace	To experience laughter and a sense of humour	56	72	17	20
Positivity/gratitude/ hope/peace	To have a quiet space to meditate or reflect	48	65	33	18
Positivity/gratitude/ hope/peace	To feel a sense of peace and contentment	48	64	31	22
Positivity/gratitude/ hope/peace	To feel hopeful	47	62	28	26
Love/belonging/respect	To feel a sense of connection with the world	47	64	30	24
Love/belonging/respect	For companionship	44	65	36	20
Appreciation of beauty	To experience or appreciate music	43	62	28	31
Love/belonging/respect	To be accepted as a person	41	61	32	31
Positivity/gratitude/ hope/peace	To be thankful or grateful	39	58	42	24
Divine	To read spiritual or religious material	37	70	32	26
Meaning and purpose	To find meaning and purpose in life	36	63	25	40
Appreciation of beauty	To experience or appreciate nature	29	58	38	39
Appreciation of beauty	To experience or appreciate beauty	29	61	30	44
Morality and ethics	To live an ethical or moral life	24	59	38	42
Divine	To pray	20	46	46	52
Resolution/death	To review their life	18	49	49	47

Construct	Spiritual Need	Often	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Love/belonging/respect	To give or receive love	15	45	61	44
Divine	To perform religious or spiritual rituals	13	50	41	61
Meaning and purpose	To find meaning in suffering	12	40	49	63
Divine	To participate in religious or spiritual services	11	44	48	62
Love/belonging/respect	For spiritual care of their bodily needs	9	29	57	67
Resolution/death	To have a deeper understanding of death	8	41	41	73
Resolution/death	To address concerns about life after death	6	43	48	66
Resolution/death	To seek forgiveness	5	35	49	74
Resolution/death	To address unmet issues before death	4	34	40	85

Table 1: Perceived prevalence of spiritual needs amongst library patrons.

Is it important for professionals to consider the following spiritual needs when providing resources and services at a library or information centre? (Q2, n=146)

Our second closed-ended question highlighted the perceived importance of considering spiritual needs in modern libraries.

The responses to this question (shown in Table 2) indicated that, although most librarians felt specific needs were significantly more important than others, there were no spiritual needs that librarians unanimously viewed as inappropriate to consider in modern librarianship. On average, librarians felt that spiritual needs associated with love/belonging/respect and positivity/gratitude/hope/peace were more important to consider than those associated with the divine and resolution/death.

A majority of responses deemed the need to read spiritual or religious materials important to consider in modern librarianship, however, numerous librarians regarded the need to participate in religious or spiritual services and perform religious or spiritual rituals as the least important needs to consider.

Most librarians that responded to this question acknowledged that the need to be accepted as a person was the most important spiritual need to consider at a library. In contrast, the need to pray received the most divided response.

Overall, librarians rated spiritual needs to be of greater importance to consider at their workplace than their perceived prevalence levels amongst patrons in Q1.

Construct	Spiritual Need	Definitely yes	Perhaps yes	Perhaps not	Definitely not	No opinion
Love/belonging/respect	To be accepted as a person	111	27	2	2	4
Love/belonging/respect	For kindness and compassion	107	34	2	0	3
Love/belonging/respect	To feel a sense of connection with the world	84	48	9	2	3
Positivity/gratitude/hope/peace	To keep a positive outlook	81	50	7	1	7

Construct	Spiritual Need	Definitely yes	Perhaps yes	Perhaps not	Definitely not	No opinion
Positivity/gratitude/hope/peace	To experience laughter and a sense of humour	73	62	5	2	4
Positivity/gratitude/hope/peace	To feel hopeful	72	54	9	3	8
Positivity/gratitude/hope/peace	To have a quiet space to meditate or reflect	71	58	7	3	7
Positivity/gratitude/hope/peace	To be thankful or grateful	61	60	10	5	10
Positivity/gratitude/hope/peace	To feel a sense of peace and contentment	60	71	9	2	4
Morality and ethics	To live an ethical or moral life	59	57	10	9	11
Appreciation of beauty	To experience or appreciate music	57	61	14	4	10
Divine	To read spiritual or religious material	55	55	17	14	5
Appreciation of beauty	To experience or appreciate beauty	55	66	10	4	11
Appreciation of beauty	To experience or appreciate nature	50	61	19	4	12
Meaning and purpose	To find meaning and purpose in life	49	67	10	8	12
Love/belonging/respect	For companionship	42	63	24	11	6
Resolution/death	To review their life	32	59	25	11	19
Love/belonging/respect	To give or receive love	29	71	26	12	8
Divine	To pray	28	48	33	26	11
Resolution/death	To have a deeper understanding of death	28	51	35	16	16
Resolution/death	To address unmet issues before death	23	46	37	21	19
Resolution/death	To seek forgiveness	22	49	33	22	20
Meaning and purpose	To find meaning in suffering	21	57	29	18	21
Resolution/death	To address concerns about life after death	20	49	37	22	18
Love/belonging/respect	For spiritual care of their bodily needs	17	49	45	20	15
Divine	To perform religious or spiritual rituals	12	42	44	41	7

Construct	Spiritual Need	Definitely yes	Perhaps yes	Perhaps not	Definitely not	No opinion
Divine	To participate in religious or spiritual services	11	41	45	41	8

Table 2: Perceived importance of considering spiritual needs in modern libraries.

These needs have been studied in the contexts of positive psychology, nursing and healthcare. Do you think they have a place in library provision? Please provide any personal thoughts or experiences. (Q3, n=126)

Our third question received text-based responses comprising views on the characteristic nature of spiritual needs and narratives of instances when patrons expressed these needs.

In general, librarians' views ranged from enthusiastic to disinterested ones and consisted of discussions about professional roles and functions, accounts of existing provisions at libraries, and reservations about the adequacy of professional training for spiritual needs.

Several responses provided justifications for or against considering spiritual needs in modern librarianship supported by personal understandings of the spiritual. We coded these responses by looking for answers to the questions—how do librarians view spiritual needs? And should spiritual needs be considered in modern librarianship?

How do librarians view spiritual needs?

The first category of codes (shown in Table 3) indicated librarians' views on the concept of spiritual needs. Librarians connected spiritual needs with humanness, emotions, wellbeing, religion and culture.

Code	Definition	Example excerpts
Humanness	These passages or sentences described spiritual needs as essential and distinguishable qualities of being human	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Most of these matters are essential to human beings</i> • <i>Our patrons are humans, and are often humans under stress. This means that deeper (spiritual) needs are present</i> • <i>[Spiritual needs] have a place in public libraries because they are part of the full human experience. If we have services for the mind, body, and emotions, but leave out the spiritual aspect, why?</i>
Emotions	These sentences described spiritual needs as being aspects of emotions and interpersonal interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>As librarian duties overlap further and further with social work, librarians need an understanding of the emotional needs of their patrons</i> • <i>Many of these [needs]- including love, finding purpose and meaning, are important social-emotional skills that are important to develop in young children</i> • <i>If you interpret spiritual needs [as] social-emotional wellness, it does have a place in libraries</i>
Wellbeing	These passages or sentences associated spiritual needs with physical health and psychological wellbeing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I think wellbeing is strictly connected to library space, a physical environment that makes people feel at ease even though they are working</i> • <i>As a place that supports wellbeing as well as work, like healthcare etc it makes sense that [spiritual needs] feed into library provision</i> • <i>Much of the delivery of Mind, Body, Spirit needs mentioned in this survey are being addressed within the Libraries' 'Healthy Ireland' programme</i>
Religion	These passages or sentences related spiritual needs with organised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I do think that publicly funded libraries need to be careful about providing actual religious services as part of their services/programming, as this could be viewed as an endorsement of religion</i>

	religion and overt displays of traditional religiosity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I do not believe 'spiritual sustenance' should be sought in the context of a library, as I am firmly of the belief that places of worship exist solely for this reason.</i>
Culture/Community	These sentences connected spiritual needs with diversity, tolerance, inclusiveness, care and consideration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>There is no reason spirituality should not be included in the community we strive for. We even discuss the tolerance/inclusiveness of different cultures, beliefs, and worldviews in our service</i> • <i>Spirituality differs from culture to culture and how it is practiced, internalized and used in daily life</i> • <i>I think librarians are in a prime position to practice the art of acceptance, generosity, and caring when it comes to providing services to our patrons</i>

Table 3: How do librarians view spiritual needs?

Should spiritual needs be considered in modern librarianship?

The second category of codes (shown in Table 4) represented librarians' views on whether spiritual needs had a place in modern librarianship.

Most librarians felt that the spiritual needs included in our survey should be considered whilst providing resources and services at a library. However, several librarians argued that considering these needs depended greatly on the type of library and its patronage.

Given the evolving nature of public libraries and the multiple roles fulfilled by academic ones, many librarians felt that library services and provisions should consider spiritual needs if and when required. However, some librarians believed that only secular aspects of these needs were appropriate to consider.

Finally, a small number of librarians regarded spiritual needs as unnecessary to consider at their place of work.

Overall, our respondents viewed the consideration of spiritual needs as an essential aspect of all service-oriented professions. However, some expressed a fervent reluctance to consider needs and practices involving overt displays of traditional religiosity.

Code	Example Excerpt
Yes all spiritual needs should be considered	<i>Yes, these questions come up, often indirectly. Yes, the place of the library in the community means spiritual needs are among those that can be looked for at the library. Librarians always do their best to answer these needs, even if there's no formal training about it</i>
Should depend on the type of library	<i>I think it depends very much on the type of library one works in. A public library might be a place to cater to many of these needs, whereas a research library might be inappropriate</i>
Yes, but secular aspects only	<i>I think Mindfulness and meditation can be especially helpful for EVERYONE if it focuses on the secular benefits. Many distrust "religious" language from prior past bad experiences or dogma</i>
Definitely not	<i>This is absolutely not something libraries should be concerned about. We cannot and should not strive to be all things to all people. It dilutes our real mission. We can teach people to locate, evaluate and find information. If they want to use that knowledge to study mythology that's up to them</i>
Unsure	<i>I'm torn on the issue because, while kindness, compassion, humor, and connectedness are in short supply, and are things libraries/librarians can put forth, the other aspects are not really within our job range (as of yet) and I'm not sure we can provide them</i>

	<i>adequately</i>
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Table 4: Should there be library provision for spiritual needs?

A handful of opinions displayed an apprehension in classifying spiritual needs as qualitatively separate from other empathetic expectations. For example, one librarian's response asserted that *'some needs mentioned such as humor and love seem not to be spiritual, per se, but just human dignity & connection. These should be met everywhere, including the library'*. Since these opinions did not explicitly share personal understandings of the spiritual, they did not neatly fall into our thematic categories. As a result, we examined these opinions separately.

Discussion

This study aimed to highlight the perceptions and opinions of librarians regarding popular needs and practices in the domain of contemplation and spirituality. To do so, we began by understanding librarians' perceptions of the prevalence of spiritual needs in libraries.

What are librarians' perceptions of the prevalence of spiritual needs amongst library patrons?

The responses to our survey indicated that librarians perceived most spiritual needs to be reasonably prevalent amongst their patrons.

Numerous librarians perceived the need for meditative silence and reflective space more often than the need to read spiritual or religious materials. In addition, librarians infrequently perceived concerns associated with death and resolution.

In general, librarians often perceived needs associated with love/belonging/respect and positivity/gratitude/hope/peace. These results supported Gorichanaz's (2021, p. 13) assertion that *'interiority and self-reflection'* were essential to cultivate in modern contemplative institutions.

Furthermore, the perceived prevalence of spiritual needs inspired additional library research questions in the domain of contemplation and spirituality. For instance, future studies may look at the distinctive ways patrons might express spiritual needs or how librarians may recognise these needs in modern librarianship.

What spiritual needs do librarians feel important to consider when providing resources and services at a library?

Most librarians that participated in our study expressed enthusiasm for providing quiet spaces to meditate and reflect. However, several librarians had reservations about accommodating traditional religious practices and services in their workplaces.

In conceptualising modern libraries as contemplative spaces, Pyati (2019, p. 366) pondered if librarians were *'comfortable with making room... for the existential and spiritual needs of patrons?'*. Our study indicated that although most librarians welcomed the consideration of needs for love, kindness, compassion, meaning, purpose and acceptance, many librarians regarded the needs associated with death and resolution to be relatively unimportant to consider in modern librarianship.

What are librarians' views regarding spiritual needs in modern librarianship?

Our open-ended question helped us understand librarians' views regarding spiritual needs and library provision—most librarians associated spiritual needs with emotional health and wellbeing. As a result, respondents who regarded their workplaces as comforting spaces, well-being hubs, and places for individual growth felt these needs were important to consider in modern librarianship.

Several responses associated spiritual needs with particular communities, cultures, people or religious groups. In these cases, librarians tended to link the consideration of these needs with attitudes such as acceptance, tolerance, inclusiveness, care and connection.

In some instances, public librarians believed that their roles overlapped with social work and therefore surmised considering spiritual needs as an existing aspect of their day-to-day interactions with patrons. Additionally, academic librarians contended that student patrons often brought their whole selves to the library. Consequently, those who understood spiritual needs as intrinsic aspects of humanness wished to provide resources and services for these needs.

Overall, librarians felt that spiritual needs were essential aspects of the everyday lives of patrons. As a result, they believed that library resources and services should be provided to support these needs. However, when spiritual needs were perceived as overtly religious or dogmatic, several librarians questioned their appropriateness for consideration in modern librarianship.

Conclusion

This study formed part of a broader research effort aimed to create a deeper understanding of the role of information and information institutions in the domain of contemplation and spirituality. The findings provide an account of librarians' perceptions regarding spiritual needs in modern librarianship and help empirically appraise the perceived importance of considering spiritual needs in Western libraries.

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