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Book review:

Academic librarianship in flux: The dynamics of negotiating professional jurisdiction

Pieta Eklund (2022). Academic librarianship in flux: The dynamics of negotiating professional jurisdiction. Skrifter från Valfrid, nr 72. The Swedish School of Library and Information Science, University of Borås, Sweden.

Academic librarianship has been "in flux" for decades. According to the Chicago sociologist Andrew Abbott, whose 1988 *System of Professions* frames the present thesis, the work of librarians is "perpetually changing" (Abbott, 1998, p. 434). Each decade adds new challenges. In the 1970s the "self-renewing library" (steady state, zero growth) was posited as the answer to capacity problems. In the 1980s we had the serials crisis. The 1990s brought us the electronic library (and the "hybrid library"), which shifted our focus in the 2000s to information literacy and learner support. Next came the (big) data decade, when the pendulum swung back from teaching to research and library responses to developments in scholarly communication, research impact measures and networked data-driven science. Pieta Eklund uses the development of library services for researchers as the focus of her doctoral study, but her particular interest is in how librarians negotiate their roles not just as supporting actors but as upfront partners in the complex process of academic research.

The empirical setting of the research is a university library in Sweden known to the researcher, but not her home institution. The study site was purposively selected to provide insights into the holistic development of library services for research within a subject-based divisional structure in real time as the library staff began the process of developing such services through working groups based at each of the three division libraries. The three libraries serve Science, Technology & Medicine, Arts & Humanities and Social Sciences respectively, and each library operates through the same function-based team structure responsible for Education (information literacy), Media (collection development) and Customer Care (frontline services). The library is thus an example of a pragmatic mixed organisational design with elements of both subject and functional specialisation; but, crucially for the present study, the physical and organisational arrangement offered the opportunity to explore disciplinary differences in researcher needs for and use of services, an issue frequently identified as important in the literature on library support for research.

The researcher had the singular aim (Eklund, 2022, p. 6) "to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of approaching and negotiating professional jurisdiction from the viewpoint of academic librarians developing library services for researchers". In other words, she was interested not simply in the roles of librarians in supporting research and serving researchers, but more significantly in the potential for changes in the division of labour for and territorial claims to research activities among two categories of '"professionals" in the academy, namely academic researchers and library practitioners, in the context of radical, ongoing change in scientific research and scholarly communication in tandem with the blurring and in some cases near erosion of boundaries among professionals working in higher education and more broadly between professionals and non-specialists/laypeople (including the public) – a trend that has been widely documented in the literature of higher education and given rise to terms such as "para-academic" and "democratic", "blended" and "third-space" professional (Boshears, 2013; Macfarlane, 2011; Dzur, 2008; 2020; Whitchurch 2008; 2009).

The language used to state the research aim is significant and points to the distinctive terminology found in the theoretical framework adopted for the study, namely Abbott's (1988) *System of Professions.* Additional pointers to the particular focus of the study can be seen in the wording used in three of the four research questions guiding the inquiry [emphases added]:

1. How do the participating librarians and the management at the three division libraries define library services for researchers, and which tasks can be included?
2. What library services for researchers emerge as the basis for approaching and negotiating *jurisdiction* within research, the task area of researchers?
3. What *disturbance*s to developing library services for researchers emerge from the academic librarian and division library management viewpoint?
4. What *settlements*, if any, to approach and negotiate *jurisdiction* within research emerge from the empirical material for academic librarians in relation to researchers and university management on various levels?

Abbott's theory has been a popular reference for librarians exploring their continually evolving professional roles and identities, likely because librarianship is a profession that features in his writing, and the notion of "jurisdiction" speaks to a longstanding preoccupation with issues of status and authority. Abbott (1998, p. 431) presciently refers to "the wildly dynamic world of contemporary librarianship" as he speculates on the implications for our field of technological change and increasing specialisation. While many scholars in different sectors and specialties of LIS have name-checked Abbott over the past two decades, his theory has resonated particularly strongly with academics and practitioners investigating the contested space of research work, data management and scholarly

communication, notably Andrew Cox (Cox & Corrall, 2013; Cox & Pinfield, 2014; Verbaan & Cox, 2014), Sabrina Petersohn (2014), Isaac Ohaji (2016; Ohaji, Chawner & Young, 2019) and Michael Ray (1999; 2001), with both Ray (1999) and Ohaji (2016) using Abbott's "system'"to frame their doctoral studies.

So there are noteworthy precedents for the study under review. However, in practice, Ray makes only limited and selective use of Abbott's conceptual framework, and while Ohaji invokes more elements of the Abbottonian conceptual repertoire, which he lays out in a research model supported by definitions of key terms (Ohaji, 2016, pp. 55-57), neither author approaches the breadth or depth of engagement demonstrated by Eklund. The present study is thus the fullest application of Abbott's system to librarianship published to date, though it is regrettable that her explanations of key terms that feature throughout the thesis are distributed over several pages in different sub-sections of Chapter 3 (which presents and explains the analytical framework), instead of being brought together in a conventional definitions section and/or a glossary of key terms, which would have made it much easier for readers unfamiliar with the theory to refer back for clarification when encountering these terms in later chapters.

The thesis is organised in nine chapters, starting with the usual introduction, followed by a literature review and the analytical framework. Chapters 4 and 5 describe the research design and methods, and the case selection and setting; while Chapters 6 and 7 analyse the findings from the empirical data collected. Chapter 8 combines a discussion of the results with the conclusions drawn from them with reference to related literature, while Chapter 9 separates out the contributions of the study and suggestions for further research. The four more substantial chapters (2, 4, 6 and 7) have useful concluding summaries. The structure thus broadly follows the standard thesis model, although Chapter 8 departs from convention by combining discussion and conclusions in each sub-section of the chapter, and similarly Chapter 9, by separating material more often integrated with a formal conclusion. A detailed table of contents enumerating chapter sections and sub-sections, including in a few cases three levels of headings helps the reader to navigate back and forward through the narrative. There is no list of illustrations and the two tables, and one figure do not use conventional decimal numbering that would locate them within their respective chapters.

The review of related literature is wide-ranging and draws on a nice selection of current scholarship from the fields of sociology, healthcare, and education as well as librarianship to build an argument from the study of professions and librarianship to the research process and (re)negotiation of professional jurisdiction. Eklund uses the literature not only to justify the study and its theoretical framing, but also to contextualise the findings of her research (in Chapter 8), bringing in additional material as needed. She also uses methodology texts to explain her study design. While doctoral literature surveys cannot – and should not – cover everything published on the issue of interest, it was surprising to find little discussion of the current "hot topic" of subject versus hybrid versus functional structures for research support in academic libraries, which has polarised opinion and generated worldwide debate over the past decade (see, for example, Brown et al., 2018; Hoodless & Pinfield, 2018; Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013; Raju et al., 2018), given the evident relevance of such discussion to the present study. This seems a missed opportunity to link the study to current professional concerns and contribute to an ongoing global debate.

The theoretical and conceptual framing of the study by Abbott's (1988) system is explained in detail over 18 pages and the meanings of key terms are elaborated at relevant points in the narrative, which enables the reader to build a context-based understanding of the complex conceptual framework used by Abbott. The terminology employed includes familiar words (jurisdiction, diagnosis, treatment, inference, disturbances, settlements) that serve particular functions in his system, as well

as terms given specific meanings (notably colligation and classification). The chapter successfully introduces the theory and its central concepts, but the presentation is dense, with no use of typography or other visual aids (bold or italic, bullets or boxes) to draw attention to key terms and their definitions, which would have helped readers check meanings when the terms resurface in later chapters.

The methodology and setting of the study are also properly explained, including the important issue of the researcher's position as a practitioner-researcher and its implications. The research used a qualitative, ethnographic single-institution instrumental case-study design, including non-participant observations (36 meetings), semi-structured interviews (24 participants), six institutional strategy/planning documents and a survey report as data sources that were analysed and interpreted iteratively to identify, define, and refine codes, categories and themes related to the research questions. The results are presented in two chapters dealing respectively with professional work, covering services and disturbances (research questions 1-3), and jurisdictions and settlements (question 4). The analysis is organised around key concepts of the theory and evidence for the findings is strengthened by anonymised quotations from participants, labelled to differentiate librarians, managers, and the branch library where they work. The findings are then revisited and discussed in relation to the research questions, relevant literature, and Abbott's theory in the penultimate chapter where, unusually, discussion and conclusion are combined in each section, which avoids unnecessary repetition, but results in a disappointing final paragraph:

> 'In conclusion, the present study proposes that developing library services for researchers to negotiate jurisdiction within research is a strategic move for the university library. Such a move would support the university in becoming a leading research institution in all research areas by involving and using its resources more efficiently. At the same time, it also positions academic librarians as a resource for research and researchers within the university organization.' (p. 236)

This conclusion does not do justice to a study that accomplishes much more than simply confirming research services as a promising strategy for university libraries, albeit one that requires skilful negotiation to move librarians from servants to partners; that was apparent at the outset of Eklund's inquiry and was clearly articulated in the opening pages of her thesis. The key messages emerging from her research are more confirmatory than revelatory, but no less important for that as she has produced strong evidence that replacing subject librarians with functional specialists is not the answer to the problem of managing library support for research. Library work requires more highly specialised technical know-how than before, but also demands an understanding of information practices in different subject contexts. Disciplinary differences matter – in every area of library work, from collection development to frontline services – but particularly in the dynamic multifaceted arena of scholarly research. Eklund's evidence confirms the need for blended professionals and multi-professional teams and confirms the value of liaison librarians and hybrid structures that facilitate the application of technical expertise in diverse subject contexts. The study also confirms the often stated but not wholly appreciated truism that academic libraries are essentially interdependent organisations that are all about building and managing relationships, within libraries as well as with their users and other stakeholders on and beyond their campus.

In the final sub-section of her discussion/conclusions chapter, Eklund introduces a useful, novel "push and pull" metaphor to describe the dynamics of *active* and *passive* negotiation of professional jurisdictions within research, suggesting there is more give-and-take involved in such negotiations than implied in the common simplistic view of competing professional engaged in power struggles. In addition, she provides vital insights into the drivers and restraints of service development when she

takes the spotlight off librarians and turns it on library managers and university administrators, whose behaviour in this case was revealed as a serious constraint on the development of services they claimed to promote and champion. Eklund openly acknowledges the limitations of her research as a single-institution study offering a snapshot of service development from a specific perspective. Although she gathered opinions from different stakeholders, she did not explore researchers' take on the on the situation, or at least not directly. Also, Abbot's theory gave the study a focus that resulted in not investigating other factors (notably gender) potentially affecting librarians' position.

Overall, Eklund achieved her aim. Her research provides valuable, unique insights into the process of developing library services for researchers, which academic librarians in similar situations can use to inform their strategy and practice; her observations on the parts played by library managers and university administrators in this case are particularly interesting and a useful alert for practitioners to check whether their managers are really committed to the developments and changes planned. Finally, the study represents a substantial contribution to Abbottonian scholarship in library and information science as the most thorough application of Abbott's theoretical framework to date, deploying his full repertoire of concepts and terminology to the problem of developing library services for researchers. Eklund's definitions of key concepts and her explanations of their application to academic librarianship (in chapter 3) could serve as a useful resource for practitioner-researchers interested in exploring issues of status, authority, and professional relationships.

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Declaration of interest

Sheila Corrall served as the lead external examiner for this doctoral thesis.