

Book Theft and Book Mutilation in a Large Urban University Library

A questionnaire study of why students in a large urban university steal and mutilate library books and periodicals identified psychological and sociological motivational factors in the students. Circumstantial reasons for such deviant behavior were not significant in this study. The individual student's perceptions of pressure for success in the academic world seemed to motivate mutilation and theft regardless of the quality of available library service. Peer approval for these behaviors was not apparently assumed.

THIS PAPER reports on a study of book theft and book mutilation using observed patterns of behavior. An attempt was made to identify the personal characteristics of students who mutilated and/or did not check out library books different from student-body members who followed normal library-use behavior. These results make a statement about those who break the rules in the university library, about the library itself, and about the structure of the university.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A literature search revealed that library abuse had been approached from different angles. Tyler isolated the history of large-scale book theft and focused on the magnitude of the problem.¹ Kaske, in conducting a library inventory search, found that 13.07 percent of the library's missing collection could have been stolen.²

Souter, who interviewed librarians in an attempt to better understand "delinquent readers," believed those who mutilated and/or stole library materials to be basically selfish. Students did not consider their theft to be wrong and they behaved in similar ways outside of the university.³ These studies indi-

cate some of the variables involved in the problem of book theft and mutilation.

A survey by Hendrick and Murfin at a state university explored some of the social dimensions of those engaging in book mutilation.⁴ Looking for motivation for the mutilation of periodicals, they found no outstanding differences between those who mutilate periodicals and those who do not. The reasons given were circumstantial: the library was closing, the copy machine broken, no money was available to make a copy, the copy machine would not reproduce photographs or charts.⁵

This study is based on information in the literature that illuminated and described the problem. To a limited degree this study replicates Hendrick and Murfin's study on the mutilation of periodicals but, in addition to examining the behavior of those students admitting to book mutilation, also includes students who removed unchecked books or stole them. In addition, this study occurred in a different sociocultural time frame. The Hendrick and Murfin study was done in 1973 and this one in 1978. This is an important difference for library book abuse because the two times compare student activity in the library before and after the copy machine "revolution."

METHODOLOGY

The Procedure

Using for the most part the issues raised by

Dana Weiss, formerly adjunct library associate at the Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University, is currently a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at New York University.

Hendrick and Murfin (but considering the others mentioned above), a questionnaire was formulated. During the spring semester of 1978, faculty members known by the author administered 100 questionnaires to their undergraduate classes. In addition, questionnaires were distributed to students in front of the student union building (of which 101 were completed and returned). With the exception of one student, all in the sample were under-

graduates. This analysis is based on the total 201 respondents.

Division of the Student Body

The questionnaire used in this study (appendix A) was designed to divide student library users into two groups. The first consisted of those who admitted that they had at least once removed library books without checking them out or had ripped a page out of a library book or periodical.

The second group consisted of students who said that they had always checked books out of the library according to the rules and who indicated they had never mutilated books. In this paper, this second group's behavior is referred to as "following library rules."

Those in the rule-violating group consisted of 8 percent (17 students) of the total sample (who sneaked books out of the library) and 9 percent (18 students) of the total sample (who had ripped pages from books or periodicals). This group comprises a total of 33 students, since 2 of the students admitted to both sneaking out books and ripping out pages. Because of the random nature of the distribution of the questionnaire (and promise of anonymity on the questionnaire itself), the author believes these numbers to be roughly indicative of the size of the problem.

The sample, for the purpose of this analysis, is divided into (1) students who check out books and do not rip pages, and (2) those who reported to have at least once sneaked a book out of the library or torn out a page (or to have done both).

The rule-following group includes 168 students, or 84 percent of the total sample, and the rule-breaking group includes 33 students, or 16 percent of the total sample.

FINDINGS

Students' Motivation for Violating Library Rules

Table 1 indicates the motivations of the university students who break the rules of the library. First, such a student is one who is likely to say he or she is doing very well academically ($p < .05$). This student may be successful in academic work because of his/her aggressiveness in fighting for grades. The motivation to succeed academically, which may lead to the rule-breaking behavior, in

TABLE 1
STUDENTS' POSSIBLE MOTIVATIONS
FOR VIOLATING LIBRARY RULES

Students' Possible Motivations for Violating Library Rules	Violating Library Rules	
	Checks Out Books and Does Not Rip Pages	Sneaks Out Books and/or Rips Pages
Academic Performance		
Very well	22% (37)	42% (14)
All right; Not too badly	75% (126)	58% (19)
Poorly	3% (5)	0% (0)
chi-square = 6.7011, df = 2, $p < .05$		
Receives Financial Aid		
Yes	60% (95)	69% (22)
No	40% (63)	31% (10)
chi-square = .9285, df = 1, $p < .05$		
Holding Down a Job		
True	55% (91)	44% (14)
False	45% (75)	56% (18)
chi-square = 1.3404, df = 1, $p < .05$		
Feeling Served by the Library		
Served well	37% (61)	33% (11)
Service could be improved	63% (102)	67% (22)
chi-square = .2663, df = 1, $p < .05$		
Cost of Copy Machine		
Never too expensive	67% (111)	70% (21)
Too expensive at least once	33% (55)	30% (9)
chi-square = .1935, df = 1, $p < .05$		
Inconvenienced by Broken Copy Machine		
Never inconvenienced	21% (30)	19% (6)
Inconvenienced at least once	79% (115)	81% (25)
chi-square = .1524, df = 1, $p < .05$		

TABLE 2
DECLARING INCONVENIENCE BY THEFT,
BY ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, AND BY VIOLATING LIBRARY RULES

Inconvenienced by Theft	Academic Performance			
	Very Well Checks Out Books and Does Not Rip Pages	Sneaks Out Books and/or Rips Pages	All Right through Checks Out Books and Does Not Rip Pages	Poorly Sneaks Out Books and/or Rips Pages
Never inconvenienced	27% (10)	36% (5)	17% (22)	16% (3)
Inconvenienced at least once	73% (27)	64% (9)	83% (104)	84% (16)

chi-square = .408
df = 1, $p < .05$
gamma = -.2

chi-square = .1912
df = 1, $p < .05$
gamma = .06

itself provides an advantage over other students who have more limited access to library materials since they follow the library rules.

Alternately, students conceivably could steal and mutilate books out of a need for money. Financial need was measured by receipt of financial aid and, though the differences between those receiving aid and those who do not are not statistically significant, there is some evidence that money is a motivating factor in student behavior. There is also some difference between the samples as to students holding jobs. Part-time employment might mean reinforcement of norms that transfers to these students' library behavior.

Students do not, as seen here, steal and mutilate books because they do feel not well served by the library. There appears to be no relationship between attitude toward the library's services and rule-breaking behavior, although it can be seen that approximately one-third of the student body feels well served while two-thirds do not. In addition, Students in this sample did not steal and mutilate library books to avoid the expense of making a copy or because the copy machines broke down frequently.

Table 2 highlights the relationship between breaking library rules and academic performance. Here the gamma for doing well academically and being inconvenienced because material wanted has been stolen is slightly negative; doing less well academically and being inconvenienced are unrelated. Students who break library rules are shrewder. The "cleverness" in these students explains both their book-theft behavior and their ability to find what they need in the

library more easily when compared with less able students.

Students' Attitude toward Violating Library Rules

Most students, regardless of library rules, take the attitude that there is no danger of getting caught mutilating books. However, having committed such an act does make the student feel it is easier to do successfully ($p < .05$) (table 3). Among students who remove books, the feeling is that they will not be caught with the book when checked by guards at the exit ($p < .05$).

Although most students in the sample indicated that they did not steal things other than library materials, others who stole from the library were somewhat more likely to steal other things. Most students, regardless of their following library rules or not, did not feel that the majority of their friends stole books, but a small percentage of students in the sample who violated library rules believed most of their friends did also. The data obtained from asking if students felt that a large proportion of the entire student body stole books indicated that students are evenly divided on whether more or less of the student body steal books.

The Relationship of Stealing and Mutilating Books

One would expect that before removing a book from the library a student might also have considered doing so in the past, and this is significant ($p < .05$) when isolating those that have stolen books. However, among students who mutilate books there is also a significant difference ($p < .05$) in this group for

considering sneaking out a book, as seen in table 4.

Students Who Sneak Out and Mutilate Books Rate Themselves

Table 5 indicates the reasons for their behavior given by students who violated library rules. The most popular answer indicates that

TABLE 3

STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARD VIOLATING RULES

Students' Attitude toward Violating Rules	Violating Library Rules	
	Checks Out Books and Does Not Rip Pages	Sneaks Out Books and/or Rips Pages
<i>Ease in Ripping Out Pages</i>		
Difficult through fairly easy	39% (65)	24% (8)
Very easy	61% (103)	76% (25)
chi-square = 2.6369, df = 1, p < .05		
<i>Odds Getting Caught with an Unchecked-Out Book (Only for Students Sneaking Out Books)</i>		
1 in 10	71% (126)	44% (7)
1 in 100	29% (52)	56% (9)
chi-square = 4.2393, df = 1, p < .05		
<i>Stealing Other Than Library Books</i>		
Never	91% (134)	83% (24)
Yes	9% (13)	17% (5)
chi-square = 1.4896, df = 1, p < .05		
<i>Do Friends Steal Books?</i>		
No	100% (135)	91% (29)
Yes	0% (0)	9% (3)
chi-square = 10.3657, df = 1, p < .05		
<i>Believes % Student Body Steals Books</i>		
10% or less	53% (82)	52% (15)
25% or more	47% (72)	48% (15)
chi-square = .0644, df = 1, p < .05		

the theft is psychologically, not practically, motivated. The sneaking out of books and ripping of pages is a bad habit done in an impersonal setting by the student thinking solely of himself.

Summary and Discussion

The bivariate approach used in this study was intended to point up the ways those students who sneaked books out of the library or ripped out pages differed from the students who were "like themselves" but followed the library expectations for behavior.

There was significant evidence that those in the rule-breaking group are good students who steal books independent of peer support. The student who will steal or mutilate library material thinks about it before attempting it, believes it is not difficult, and does not expect to be caught.

Findings of previous studies were confirmed regarding the size of the problem and the extent of library abuse. Kaske had found 13.07 percent of a collection missing because of theft; the data in this study indicated 8 percent of the student body actively steal books.

This study, in the context of the study by Hendrick and Murfin, suggests that students who mutilate books also consider stealing them from the library.

Students who had mutilated books in the Hendrick and Murfin study indicated that the copy machines were too expensive. Interviews with the "rip-offs" revealed that if the library had not been closing or the students had had the right change for the copy machine, etc., the mutilation would not have taken place (i.e., the act was circumstantial). In this sample the cost of making a copy or the workability of the machine was not related to the ripping out of pages or the sneaking out of books.

If this study had been conducted at the

TABLE 4
SNEAKING OUT A BOOK OR RIPPING OUT PAGES,
BY CONSIDERING SNEAKING OUT A BOOK

Considering Sneaking Out a Book	Sneaking Out Books		Ripping Out Pages	
	Checks Out Books	Sneaks Out Books	Does Not Rip Pages	Rips Out Pages
Never considered	80% (122)	0% (0)	80% (122)	39% (7)
Considered at least once	20% (30)	100% (17)	20% (30)	61% (11)
		chi-square = 47.86 df = 1, p < .05		chi-square = 14.159 df = 1, p < .05

TABLE 5
STUDENTS GIVE REASONS FOR STEALING
AND MUTILATING LIBRARY BOOKS

Percent	Reason
45%	Do not consider the needs of others
36%	Need the photographs or charts in books and cannot photocopy them
30%	Do not think about the act but steal and mutilate casually and thoughtlessly
27%	Are not aware of the cost of theft and mutilation to the library
24%	Cannot afford the copy machine or price of a book but want to own a copy
18%	Steal and mutilate books as an expression of hostility toward the library and the university

same time as the Hendrick and Murfin study, it might have yielded more similar results on some variables, but there was the five-year difference between the two, from 1973 to 1978. By 1978, the copy machine had become an integral part of "using the library." An article about the photocopy industry stated that 1973 was the largest profit year in history, up to that time, for the photocopy industry, in a trend toward more photocopying that began accelerating in the 1960s⁶ and has continued at more rapid rates since 1973. When students interviewed for the Hendrick and Murfin study indicated that better access to copy machines would stop mutilation, regular use of copy machines in the library was still a novelty. But consistency in the size of the problem suggests that more copy machines do not reduce mutilation.

There are other differences in the findings between this study and that done by Hendrick and Murfin. It was found here that better students mutilate books and sneak them out of the library, while the other study found that, to some degree, students with a higher grade point average mutilated books but the relationship was not statistically significant. In Hendrick and Murfin, students who had mutilated periodicals felt they had been treated unfairly by the library, while in this study attitudes toward the library and feeling well served were not related to book theft or mutilation.

This study showed that students who break library rules do not feel they will get caught doing so and consider book theft beforehand.

Hendrick and Murfin also found that students do consider mutilating before attempting it and do not feel they will get caught.

CONCLUSION

Because this study yielded results that the attitude toward the library and availability of copy machines were not related to book theft or mutilation, I believe the norm-violating behavior to be caused not primarily by the more external library service but by a psychological and sociological state within the students who commit such acts. The fact that a student who rips a page out of a book is significantly more likely to also consider sneaking out a book makes me believe that there is a definite antisocial streak that is distinctive.

I believe that students who break the library rules in this way do so because of their coping response to do well under academic pressure. It was the better students in the total sample who admitted to committing acts of library abuse. Because this study was done in an urban university library, it could be said that the "toughness" of city life causes the theft. However, I believe a case could be made for "danger" on a rural college campus also, specifically, the pressure for good grades.

Since it is more likely to be the better students who are involved, I agree that they are behaving "selfishly" as reported by Souter. It is relevant that these students, when choosing a motivation for this behavior, choose "Do not consider the needs of others" most often. When a "good" student steals material he needs, he/she does so because his/her future professional career is more important than the library rules themselves. Good grades may serve to reinforce for these students that it is more important what happens in their individual careers than sensitivity to the needs of their fellow students. It could be that the alienation intrinsic to university life as distinct from the intimacy of a college is a contributing factor.

OTHER HYPOTHESES

The impersonal structure of the university may also contribute to antisocial behavior in the library. As a long-range goal, university administrators would do well in attempting to make students feel that they are a part of a

personal community. The student working in a large library is not relieved of the impersonal, achievement-oriented structure of the classroom. Better students appear to become alienated from their own better values when under academic pressure, abuse their library privileges, and do not believe this to be too serious since they don't believe they'll get caught. In reality, they probably are not caught, and the pattern of book theft remains one thought up and practiced by the student acting alone.

Before attempting to solve the problems of the students' feelings of isolation and the pressure of the academic setting, it is more practical to change immediately the cycle of book theft and abuse. The fact that the library does not apprehend the student sets up the cycle of repeated theft and the student becomes unafraid of the consequences of his or her actions. The validity of this is seen when

most students (having broken the library rules or not) feel they will not get caught ripping out pages.

If students believed they would be caught, and library-rule breaking were taken seriously, the problem would decrease significantly, and a different psychology would evolve among students in their use of library privileges. The larger academic community appears to tolerate book theft and mutilation because it feels that students suffer as they try to maintain their grade point average. An objective understanding of the motivations of the student who mutilates and steals books should make those in the library community less sentimental on this issue. If the problem of library-book abuse is to be taken more seriously and even eliminated, the question of why student offenders are not caught has to be addressed seriously.

REFERENCES

1. Carol W. Tyler, "Book Theft: A Brief Review," *Cornell University Libraries Bulletin* 202:9-12 (Oct. 1976).
2. Neal K. Kaske, "Moffitt Undergraduate Library Book Loss Study," *Library Security Newsletter* 2:6-7 (Spring 1976).
3. G. H. Souter, "Delinquent Readers: A Study of the Problem in University Libraries," *Journal of Librarianship* 8:96-110 (April 1976).
4. Clyde Hendrick and Marjorie E. Murfin, "Project Library Ripoff: A Study of Periodical Mutilation in a University Library," *College & Research Libraries* 35:402-11 (Nov. 1974).
5. Marjorie E. Murfin and Clyde Hendrick, "Ripoffs Tell Their Story: Interviews with Mutilators in a University Library," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 1:8-12 (May 1975).
6. "Photo Growth Spurred by Copiers," *Exchange* 35:12-13 (April 1974).

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

The information collected in the following survey is going to be used in a term paper about the library for a graduate course. All information will be kept confidential and anonymity is ensured. If you cannot answer any question, skip over it to the other questions. Thank you for your time and cooperation.

Circle the answer you choose.

1. My major area of study is _____
2. I feel academically I am doing:
 - A. Very well
 - B. All right
 - C. Not too badly
 - D. Poorly
3. I am a full-time student:
 - TRUE
 - FALSE
4. I also hold a full-time or part-time job:
 - TRUE
 - FALSE
5. I:
 - A. Receive financial aid
 - B. Do not receive financial aid
6. I am:
 - A. A graduate student
 - B. An undergraduate student

7. In general:
- I feel well served by the library.
 - I feel well served by the library but there are some things that could be improved.
 - I feel the library isn't operated very well.
8. How many times have you removed a book from the library without checking it out?
- Zero
 - 1-4
 - 4 or more
9. If you have removed a book in the above manner, how many times did you return it to the library after that?
- Zero
 - 1 or 2 times
 - 3 or more times
10. Have you ever considered removing a book from the library without checking it out?
- Never
 - Once or twice
 - Three times or more
11. What do you think the odds are of being caught with an unchecked-out book at the door?
- One out of a 100
 - One out of 10
 - One out of 2
12. What proportion of the student body do you think has stolen books?
- 2%
 - 10%
 - 25%
 - 50%
 - 75%
13. Knowing your close friends as you do, how many have stolen books?
- the minority
 - the majority
 - 10%
 - 50%
 - 75%
14. Have you been inhibited from using the Xerox machine because it was too expensive?
- Never
 - One to four times
 - A great deal of the time
 - Most of the time
15. Have you been inconvenienced because the Xerox machines were not working?
- Never
 - One to four times
 - A great deal of the time
 - Most of the time
16. Have you ever torn a section out of a library book or magazine?
- Never
 - Once
 - Two to four times
 - More than four times
17. Do you think ripping out a section of a book or magazine would be easy or difficult to accomplish?
- Very easy
 - Fairly easy
 - Not too hard
 - Difficult
18. Have you every been inconvenienced because a book you want has been stolen or a section you wanted ripped out?
- Never
 - Once or twice
 - Three or more times
19. If you have ever removed a book from the library without checking it out or torn out a section of a book or magazine, circle as many of the following choices as are valid for yourself. Books are stolen and mutilated because students:
- Do not consider the needs of others
 - Cannot afford the Xerox machine or the price of a book but want to own a copy.
 - Are not aware of the cost of theft and mutilation to the library.
 - Need the photographs or charts in books and magazines and cannot photocopy them.
 - Do not think about the act or the library but steal and mutilate casually and thoughtlessly.
 - Steal and mutilate books as an expression of hostility toward the library and the university.
 - None of the above.
 - Other.
20. Do you steal things other than library books?
- Never
 - Yearly
 - Monthly
 - Weekly

Optional question:

If it were up to me to better control book theft and mutilation of library material, I would _____
