Chapter 1
Introduction

The choice of leisure interests available to people today is wider than ever before. The 2012 Olympics aimed to inspire a generation to take up sport. People have been drawn to ballroom dancing over recent years, influenced by television programmes such as *Strictly Come Dancing*. The bestsellers lists are often full of books on baking and cooking written by celebrity chefs. Such pastimes can seem attractive, exciting or fascinating to people looking for a new hobby – a good way to relax in a busy world. However, some hobbies can seem mysterious, strange or baffling to outsiders. Why would anyone want to do that? What on earth is the appeal?

These questions certainly represented my attitude to reading groups some years ago. Reading has always been my main hobby. The idea of not having a book on the go is simply unthinkable. You might imagine that I would have been the obvious person to join a book club but this was not the case. I had no interest whatsoever. My attitude at the time was based on stereotypes and ignorance. A friend had once told me that reading group members had been described in a newspaper as ‘chardonnay-swilling, middle-class women’. I pictured pretentious people, posturing, pontificating and point scoring. I wanted no part in that. What could it add to my reading experience? Surely that would only spoil the magical relationship between me and my book.

Then a colleague at the school where I was teaching at the time made a suggestion that forced me to reassess my attitude. She was taking a group of children to the local library to read some poems to the reading group for visually impaired people (VIPs) and she invited me to go along. At the time I was trying to think of an idea for my MA dissertation and the idea of this reading group seemed interesting. It is embarrassing to admit that, with very little knowledge of visual impairment at that time, I went along expecting everyone to be reading books in Braille. I was, therefore, surprised to find that no one in the group was using printed text of any sort; instead they were all using audio. However, this was not the only surprise. This group was far from the stereotype of ‘chardonnay-swilling, middle-class women’ that I had imagined. It was impossible to miss the strong sense of community. The room was filled with warmth and there was much laughter. The discussion of the book was animated – no affectation or pseudo-intellectual babble here but lively debate with strong opinions expressed and moving personal stories shared. This was not what I was expecting at all and I was hooked. Since then I have participated in three library-based VIP reading groups and also set up a reading group at the school where I worked. Despite the fact that many of us have since left the school, the reading group is still going strong, our commitment to the group greater than the link between work colleagues.
My research over a period of years has tried to capture the spirit of the reading group experience. Until recently reading groups have been under-researched, perhaps because, as small groups predominantly for women, they were not part of the serious world of politics, religion or work (Long, 2003). However, researchers from a number of disciplines are now investigating reading groups. Examples include projects to study the discourse of reading groups (O’Halloran, 2009), work with prison reading groups (Hartley and Turvey, 2009) and the Beyond the Book project which has investigated mass reading events in the UK, US and Canada. Other work has focused on the impact of TV Book Clubs, such as the Oprah Winfrey Book Club in the US (Hall, 2003; Konchar Farr and Harker, 2008; Rooney, 2005) or the Richard and Judy Book Club in the UK (Hounsome, 2005; Ramone and Cousins, 2011; Rehberg Sedo, 2008).

Current interest in reading groups has also led to fictionalised representations in books, films and TV shows. These representations often show the characters both within and outside of the book club, allowing their current and back-stories to be linked to and interwoven with the reading group meetings. Because of this, they allow the members of the book club to be known by the reader or viewer in a way which much research does not allow. However, what about the characters in real reading groups? Surely our understanding of reading groups would be enhanced by knowing more about the stories and lives of those who participate in these groups.

I was very fortunate that one of the libraries I was working with decided to set up a second VIP reading group as this presented a unique opportunity to work with a group from the very outset and to follow it for an extended period of time. I wanted the research to work on two levels. Firstly, I wanted to learn more about the individuals who belonged to the group. What were their histories as readers and what experiences did they bring with them to the reading group? Secondly, I wanted to explore the reading group experience to learn more about what motivated the members to join the group, what expectations they brought with them and what role the group played in their reading lives. This research forms the foundation of this book.

However, just as this book aims to set the experiences of the group members in context by tracing their histories as readers, it is equally important to set the group they belong to within the wider context of reading groups. For this reason the next section provides a brief overview of the growth of reading groups and libraries’ involvement with them to provide some background to the group which is the main focus of this book.

**Growth of Reading Groups**

Discussing the origins of reading groups is difficult to some extent. This is because reading groups can be defined in a number of ways, meaning that it is not absolutely

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1 http://www.beyondthebookproject.org/
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clear what should or should not be included within any definition. Slezak’s *The Book Group Book* (1995), for example, contains some rather poetic definitions, with reading groups compared to ‘a well-made patchwork quilt’ or ‘a chorus, composed of four distinct voices that create harmonies and counterpoints for each other’ (p. 107). Some definitions offer a less rose-tinted view. For example, reading groups have also been described as ‘get-togethers for sad middle-class women’ (Colgan, 2002, unpaged). However, if reading groups are defined broadly as people coming together to share a book, then they have existed for a very long time indeed. As Hartley writes:

Reading in groups has been around for as long as there has been reading … The Romans did it, emigrants on board ship to Australia did it, Schubert and his friends meeting to read and discuss the poems of Heine were doing it. (Hartley, 2002, p. 1)

Manguel (1997) reminds us that in the Middle Ages, when literacy was not widespread, many people only had access to texts by hearing them read aloud, meaning that people came together in groups to listen to readings. Other examples of shared reading experiences would be the reading circles organised by the working classes as part of Victorian mutual improvement societies (Rose, 2002) or, more recently, in the 1960s, the network of book discussion groups which arose from the National Housewives’ Register to provide mental stimulation for mothers of young children who were isolated (Bell, 2001). However, while it is true that reading has long existed as a shared experience, there has nevertheless been an explosion of interest in reading groups since the end of the last century. Indeed, Hartley’s foundational study of reading groups (Hartley, 2002) revealed that 67 per cent of the groups surveyed then had been set up within the previous five years, clearly indicating a growing rise in interest at that time.

The media is undoubtedly linked to this increase in interest and popularity. Television shows such as Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club in America and the Richard and Judy Book Club in the UK both had a huge impact on readers, book sales and the profiles of the featured authors. In fact, in the UK the phenomenon came to be known as the ‘Richard and Judy Effect’ (McQueen, 2006). When the Richard and Judy Book Club finally ended, TV’s interest in reading groups continued, however, through the TV Book Club launched in 2010. Reading groups are also supported by other types of media; for example, newspapers, magazines, websites and radio all support reading group activity. As a result of this popularity, a wealth of material has emerged to support reading groups. Publishers provide recommendations, lists of questions and guides for reading groups. Websites enable people to participate

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2 Interestingly, the first winner of the Penguin/Orange Readers’ Group Prize in 2002 was the National Women’s Register Readers’ Group from Wokingham. http://readers.penguin.co.uk/static/readersgroupprize/index_02.html
in virtual reading groups. Cityread London\(^3\), which in 2012 chose Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* to mark the author’s anniversary, aims (like other mass reading events) to turn the city itself into a giant reading group.

Reading groups are diverse in nature. They may read a wide range of material or focus on specific genres (e.g. crime, science fiction, manga) and they are known to meet in a wide range of venues: private homes, places of work, pubs, theatres. While they have been labelled as a ‘phenomenon that has become a near ubiquitous part of bourgeois life’ (Higgins, 2005, unpaged), this description still fails to acknowledge the full spectrum of reading group activity. For some time, Penguin supported a reading group prize\(^4\) and the shortlists, including groups that meet in prisons, schools and high security psychiatric hospitals, hint at the diversity of reading group membership and introduce the idea that reading groups in the twenty-first century are more than opportunities for people to meet and discuss books. For example, The Reader Organisation\(^5\) supports the *Get Into Reading* scheme (weekly read-aloud groups which meet in locations such as care homes, mental health drop-in centres, hostels and refugee centres, the aim being to improve the health and wellbeing of those who participate). Furthermore, prison reading groups can contribute to tackling poor literacy levels among prisoners and play a role in rehabilitation (Hartley and Turvey, 2009), while Bibliotherapy reading groups may use the power of books to help people overcome anxiety and depression.

**Libraries and Reading Groups**

Within the landscape of reading groups, libraries play a vital role. A key document, which helped to establish libraries’ understanding of the purpose of reading groups and to develop their agendas with regard to this service, was *A National Public Library Development Programme for Reading Groups* (MLA, 2004). According to this document, reading groups help to inform the main strands of the modern mission for libraries which was set out in *Framework for the Future* (DCMS, 2003) (the then government’s long-term strategic vision for public libraries) by building on libraries’ traditional core skills of promoting reading, informal learning and self-help. Furthermore, the document states that reading groups bring benefits both to individuals (for example, by widening reading, supporting learning, being empowering and giving a sense of belonging and inclusion) and to libraries in delivering on national and local government priorities such as learning and social inclusion. Library engagement with reading groups has had a significant impact. A Mapping Survey (The Reading Agency, 2008) found that the number of library-linked reading groups almost doubled in the four years to 2008. Furthermore, the

\(^3\) [http://www.dickens2012.org/first-city-read-london-uk](http://www.dickens2012.org/first-city-read-london-uk)  
\(^4\) [http://readers.penguin.co.uk/static/readergroupprize/index.html](http://readers.penguin.co.uk/static/readergroupprize/index.html)  
\(^5\) [http://thereader.org.uk/](http://thereader.org.uk/)
data showed wide-ranging membership through a diverse range of groups, including
groups for visually impaired people.

There is some debate about where and when the first VIP reading group was
established. One of the first – if not the first – was set up at Winchester Library in
1998 as a response to the first National Year of Reading. This was in recognition of the
fact that people who depended on alternative formats were effectively excluded from
the book group experience at that time, largely because of the cost of commercial
unabridged audio books. Through the local blind club in Winchester a group of blind
and partially sighted people was recruited to launch the group, with clear ground
rules established from the start:

- only unabridged books would be used, whatever the cost;
- no one would be excluded – sighted people were welcome to join but the
  starting point would always be blind and partially sighted people;
- titles would be selected purely on grounds of their recurrence in the reading
  lists of sighted groups nationally – there would be no censorship or selection
  based on assumptions around disability and/or age;
- everyone’s opinion would be equally valid.

As a large public library service, reading material for this group could be assembled
from stock. However, not all libraries wanting to establish a VIP group could
function in this way and this led to the involvement of Calibre Audio Library\(^6\), a
national charity which provides unabridged audio books for adults and children who
are unable to access print. When approached in 2001 by a library interested in setting
up a VIP reading group, Calibre provided them with a set of cassettes. From this
beginning their involvement has grown and they are now supporting over 90 groups,
many library-based but some run by local societies for blind and partially sighted
people. Groups pay an annual fee for this service which varies depending on the
number of copies required. Because of changing technology, Calibre has now moved
to providing groups with multiple digital copies of books on MP3 CDs.

The spread of VIP reading groups has depended on a number of factors.
Some groups were established as more libraries became aware of Calibre’s role
in supporting reading groups. The impetus for some groups came not only from
librarians but from individuals or charities contacting libraries to recommend setting
up a reading group. Other groups were established in places where an original group
had reached capacity or to provide an additional group in a more accessible location.
Yet more groups resulted from consultation into the needs of blind and partially
sighted library users which established local demand for a reading group. One group
was offered originally as a pilot as part of Make a Noise in Libraries (MANIL)
(an annual campaign to bring public libraries and blind and partially sighted people

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together to improve access to books and information); however, the interest shown resulted in a permanent group being set up. While part of the rationale for these groups may be to address the needs of blind and partially sighted readers, they also provide an opportunity for libraries to respond to political agendas, such as social inclusion, lifelong learning and reader development.

One of the interesting things about VIP groups is the variety of names that are attached to them. They might be called reading groups, listening groups, talking groups or book clubs. In some ways this diversity can be linked to the fact that these groups operate using a range of formats and to social and cultural attitudes to these formats (this is explored further in Chapter 3). For example, if the members are listening to a book can or should the group be called a reading group? In some ways, such questions link back to questions asked in the nineteenth century when reading and writing systems for blind and partially sighted people were developed. Discussions at that time partly focused on how format impacted on the reader’s relationship with the text. The Indigent Blind Visiting Society founded by Lord Shaftesbury in 1834 sent out sighted readers to read the Bible aloud to poor Londoners but these human readers were gradually replaced by embossed books. This change reflected attitudes to ‘the word of God’ and the belief that private, personal engagement with the Bible, rather than a mediated experience, was important for achieving grace and salvation (Tilley, 2008). A system, therefore, needed to be developed to enable blind and partially sighted people to read independently. Braille was finally chosen from a number of systems and adopted in the 1870s.

However, it was not long before listening again became important as a form of reading for blind and partially sighted people. Many soldiers returned from the First World War battlefields with visual impairments. Although Braille was taught to enable individuals to read and write, some struggled to master the system so the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) began to explore formats and methods of producing books that could ‘talk’. The first Talking Books, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie and *Typhoon* by Joseph Conrad, were finally sent out in 1935. Since then, the RNIB has continued to develop this format and, in the late 1990s, began to explore using a digital format; by 2002 DAISY books (Digital Accessible Information System) were available. These books are designed to allow the reader to move around the text as efficiently as a print user and need less space than traditional audio books. More recently, the RNIB BookStream book club

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7 http://www.rnib.org.uk/livingwithsightloss/reading/services/rnibnationallibrary/manil/Pages/make_a_noise_in_libraries.aspx
9 A DAISY book allows the reader to make bookmarks; pause books; speed up or slow down the voice; read or ignore footnotes; jump easily from chapter to chapter, heading to heading and page to page. http://www.rnib.org.uk/livingwithsightloss/reading/how/audio/Pages/understanding-audio.aspx?AuthoringError=NoUpdatesOnGetRequest#H2Heading4
has enabled DAISY books to be streamed via an internet link and listened to on a computer. Other charities, such as Calibre Audio Library and Listening Books, also support people with print disabilities by providing material on audio. Meanwhile, developments in technology, such as text-to-speech facilities, allow more books to be experienced through audio. Nevertheless, the development of audio books has not replaced direct engagement with text for many blind and partially sighted readers. Recent research has found that blind and partially sighted people use multiple reading formats (Creaser et al., 2012) with Large Print books and Braille continuing to be used by many readers. This research also confirmed the importance of reading for pleasure and identified the important role that both reading groups and libraries play in supporting blind and partially sighted readers. Such reports are significant in developing understanding of the current situation and enabling recommendations to be made. However, while such reports are useful, there has been no longitudinal study of a VIP reading group. This book seeks to contribute a new dimension to what is known by sharing the experiences of a particular group of blind and partially sighted readers. The following section introduces the research on which this book is based by briefly outlining the design of the project.

The Research

The Newell Group – An Ethnographic Study

The research reported in this book is based on a longitudinal study of a VIP group undertaken as doctoral research. After some years of running a successful VIP group, Newell Library (for ethical reasons, all names used are pseudonyms) decided to set up a second group to cope with demand. The group met for the first time in September 2007. Four members attended this first meeting; the group gained and lost members over time until there were seven regular members. The group met on a weekday afternoon once a month, 11 times a year (no meeting in December), and meetings lasted for one hour. One librarian ran the original VIP group with another librarian as her assistant. When the second group was set up, the librarians decided to alternate monthly between the groups so that each read one book per month for these groups.

As a non-disabled researcher working with participants who were all blind or partially sighted, it was important to design the project carefully. The shift from an individual to a social model of disability was accompanied by a shift in approaches to disability research (Barnes and Sheldon, 2007). Traditional approaches have been criticised for alienating disabled people and reinforcing disablism in society (Thomas, 1999) by failing disabled people on three counts: through failing to capture and reflect the experience of disability from the perspective of disabled people themselves; through failing to provide useful information for policy making and contributing little to improving the material conditions under which disabled
people live; and through failing to acknowledge the struggles of disabled people
themselves and to recognise that disability is not simply a medical or welfare issue,
but a political one as well (Oliver, 2002). As a result, research has been considered by
some to be a violation of the experiences of people with disabilities, being irrelevant
to their needs and failing to improve the material circumstances and quality of their
lives (Oliver, 1992).

Two other approaches – participatory and emancipatory research – challenge the
traditional model. Emancipatory research is explicitly political by nature (Reason
quoted in Oliver, 1992) and seeks a restructuring of the research process, so that
disabled people and their organisations, rather than academics and researchers,
have control of the research (Barnes, 2004). However, although this might be a
worthy aim, there have been suggestions that it may prove to be an ‘impossible
dream’ (Oliver quoted in Mercer, 2002).

In terms of this project, emancipatory research did not seem appropriate as,
although the participants were keen to be involved, they did not want to take
control of the process. It would, therefore, have been unethical to impose an
approach that would have impacted negatively on what they really wanted to do
– come together as a reading group. Another approach, participatory research,
seemed more appropriate. This approach aims to be ‘a potential source of change
and empowerment for research participants as well as a process for influencing
professional policy and practice by reflecting the views and opinions of service
users’ (French and Swain, 2000, p. 38). This approach means adopting methods
which try to break the traditional hierarchical researcher-researched relationship
and to engage participants in the design, conduct and evaluation of research.
Adopting this approach was more appropriate for this project as it allowed the
participants to be involved but in ways that did not intrude on their reading group
activity.

As a study of a reading group, ethnography was the most appropriate
methodology. Ethnography aims to gain an ‘appreciation of the culture of a
social group’ (Bryman, 2012, p. 383) and involves ‘participating ... in people’s
daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to
what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews,
collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available
to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of enquiry’ (Atkinson and
Hammersley, 2007, p. 3). Using multiple methods, the product of ethnography
is a richly written account (O’Reilly, 2005), providing what Geertz (1973)
called ‘thick description’. However, ethnography is a broad field and so it was
necessary to refine the approach. Put very simply, ethnography can be divided
into traditional and new approaches. Traditional ethnography, underpinned by
positivist assumptions such as objectivity, reason, truth, coherence and validity
(Van Maanen, 1995), is characterised by the use of certain conventions, such as
the absence of the author from the text, and seeks to create ‘a museum-like picture
of the culture being studied’ (Rosaldo quoted in Denzin and Lincoln, 2002, p. 2). However, an approach that sought to create ‘a museum-like picture’ was unlikely to truly capture the spirit of the reading group experience.

By contrast, new ethnography, underpinned by postmodernism’s preference for seeking out multiple voices and its disbelief in grand narratives (Punch, 2005), aims, through the use of collaborative and dialogic research methods, to be ‘truer to the lived worlds of others’ (Sauukko, 2003, p. 14), and to give voice to people historically positioned on the margins of society (Angrosino, 2007). Casting doubt on the idea of an objective researcher seeking to uncover absolute truths, new ethnography challenges the supposed neutral and value-free stance of traditional ethnography (Callaway, 1992) and makes researchers accountable for their work both in terms of their positions of authority and their moral responsibility in terms of representation and interpretation (Madison, 2012). As such, a participatory approach was compatible with new ethnography. Actively involving the group members in the project helped to address issues of power and ownership. Rather than belonging to me, the intention was to empower the participants and to privilege their voice. This was important because, if voice can be a way of going beyond an exploration of issues, being inherently political and about protest (Gitlin, 1992, cited in Gitlin and Thompson, 1993), then this was appropriate for this project:

If disability research is about researching oppression, and I would argue that it is, then researchers should not be professing ‘mythical independence’ to disabled people, but joining with them in their struggles to confront and overcome this oppression. Researchers should be espousing commitment not value freedom, engagement not objectivity, and solidarity not independence. There is no independent haven or middle ground when researching oppression: academics and researchers can only be with the oppressors or with the oppressed. (Barnes, 1996, p. 110)

Data Collection

A common method of data collection in ethnography is participant observation. With participant observation, the researcher becomes the instrument of data collection (Coffey, 1999). For anyone carrying out participant observation, a decision has to be taken as to the balance between participation and observation. The ethnographer can take the roles of complete observer, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant or complete participant (Jorgensen, 1989). The contrast is in the degree of involvement with the people and in the activities (Spradley, 1980). At the beginning of the project I was unsure how far I should participate actively in meetings. However, a conversation with one of the participants made clear why I should adopt the role of participant-as-observer.
Pete: you don't say very much

Eileen: it's a really fine line between thinking am I meant to behave like I'm part of this reading group or am I meant to behave like I'm an observer … I often don't say anything 'cos I think, am I overstepping the mark

Pete: no, you're always better off as part of the group … it works much better … if you are in the room, then you should be part of whatever's going on, you shouldn't sit and just observe … there's no point just being there … as far as I'm concerned if you don't talk, you're not there

Pete's comment was a reminder of the importance of verbal cues for blind and partially sighted people; if I had simply observed, this could almost have been constructed as covert research. With the permission of the librarians, I therefore decided to participate actively in the group, using the same cassettes to read the same audio books as the group and taking part in the discussion. Data was collected from three years of reading group meetings. At first I made handwritten notes, which were typed up as soon as possible after the meeting. However, there were times when conversation was dynamic and energetic, making it difficult to make notes (and these were often the moments I wanted to capture). With the librarians’ agreement, I spoke to the group about the possibility of recording meetings and, from that point, with the participants’ consent, I recorded the meetings and transcribed the parts of the discussion that were relevant to the project.

In addition to observation data, five participants agreed to take part in interviews, the purpose of which was to reflect both on their experiences as individual readers and their experiences of belonging to the reading group. French and Swain have argued for an approach which includes the ‘individual as well as collective experience of disablement’, seeing this combined focus as essential in achieving a ‘politics of hope’ for achieving individual and collective social change (French and Swain 2006 quoted in Munford et al., 2008, p. 345). It was, therefore, appropriate to include both the individual and group experiences of the participants.

While the doctoral research focused on the group members for the reasons outlined above, this book also includes data collected from librarians so that their perspectives on reading groups in general and VIP reading groups in particular can also be shared. Questionnaires were collected from 21 librarians (19 in England, 2 in Scotland). Furthermore, I interviewed the librarian who set up one of the first VIP groups, while another librarian, who is visually impaired, preferred a telephone interview to completing the questionnaire. The questionnaire was organised around themes which had emerged from the original research.

This book, therefore, aims to explore the complex nature of reading groups. As well as simply providing opportunities for people to come together and discuss their reading, these groups fulfil a variety of functions both for the members who
participate in them and for the libraries which run them. The chapters of this book explore these different aspects to create a detailed picture of this under-researched field.

Overview of the Book

Chapter 2 presents the reading histories of the five participants who engaged in the research. Beginning with an overview of the value of narrative research, these co-constructed reading histories, entirely in the words of the participants, present each participant’s background as a reader. In this way, the cast of characters whose experiences underpin the book are introduced.

Chapter 3 discusses the issues which blind and partially sighted people face as readers. These issues include practical matters, such as format, cost and the availability of accessible materials, as well as social and cultural factors. Given that this VIP group (like many others) depends on audio, this chapter also explores the definition of what it means to be a reader and cultural attitudes to reading via alternative formats. Moreover, it considers how the narrator of audio books impacts on the reading experience.

Chapter 4 discusses key library documents which identify reading groups as a strategy for delivering on the agenda for social inclusion. This chapter explores this link in detail, discussing the terminology used in the debate and exploring how policy is put into practice. In addition, it calls into question whether the provision of discrete groups for different sections of society truly represents inclusive practice.

Reading groups are also thought to play a role in supporting libraries in addressing the agenda for lifelong learning. Chapter 5 explores the different ways in which reading groups provide opportunities for learning and the different types of learning that can be part of the reading group experience. There is a particular focus on the quality of the discussion that happens at VIP reading groups and factors that impact both positively and negatively on this.

Chapter 6 broadens the perspective by including some snapshots of reading group activity for blind and partially sighted people in other countries. The book then ends with a final discussion of the link between reading groups and social justice by looking again at the issue of discrete or integrated groups and the importance of libraries adopting a needs based approach in their reading group provision.