Chapter 7
Health Information Literacy and the Experience of 65 to 79 Year Old Australians

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ABSTRACT

Information Literacy (IL) is presented here from a relational perspective, as people's experience of using information to learn in a particular context. A detailed practical example of such a context is provided, in the Health Information Literacy (HIL) experience of 65 to 79 year old Australians. A phenomenographic investigation found five qualitatively distinct ways of experiencing HIL: Absorbing (intuitive reception), Targeting (a planned process), Journeying (a personal quest), Liberating (equipping for independence), and Collaborating (interacting in community). These five ways of experiencing indicated expanding awareness of context (degree of orientation towards their environment), source (breadth of esteemed information), beneficiary (the scope of people who gain), and agency (amount of activity) across HIL core aspects of information, learning, and health. These results illustrate the potential contribution of relational IL to information science.

INTRODUCTION

Information literacy (IL) has rapidly become an object of interest within library and information research, with the majority of this enquiry conducted in educational (Bruce, 1997) and workplace settings (Lloyd, 2005). Less research has been conducted exploring IL in the context of everyday life. However Todd (2000, p. 30) commented that "information makes a difference to everyday lives of people and that having the knowledge and skills to connect with and interact with this information can enable people to solve real world problems and address life concerns" but "information literacy literature to date gives little attention to this". Recently, however, Partridge, Tilley and Bruce (2008) noted that a "community information literacy" research territory was starting to emerge and that a "collective consciousness" (Bruce, 2000) for this new research domain was slowly forming. Indeed, over the last several years studies have begun to explore IL within different groups (e.g. migrants – Lloyd, Kennan, Thompson, & Qayyum, 2013) and in a range of contexts (e.g. religion – Gunton, Bruce, & Stoodley, 2012). These studies have adopted different theoretical lenses as well as different research methods. This chapter builds upon the growing collective consciousness of community IL research. It presents how Australians aged 65 to 79 experience IL in a health context.

The chapter first provides a background to the study, introducing the field of consumer health information and how this study is situated with respect to that field. Next the chapter outlines the current research, providing details of the methodological approach, the participants, data collection, analysis and findings. The chapter concludes with reflections on the next steps for both the research project and the broader community IL research domain.

BACKGROUND

In 2003 the Australian Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) proposed three generations of ageing Australians: the middle age (aged 45 to 64), the younger old (aged 65 to 79) and the older old (80 years and over) (PMSEIC, 2003). This current paper reports on the findings of a study into the experience of the younger old, concerning their use of information to learn about health, also known as health information literacy (HIL). It is part of a larger project embracing different generations of ageing Australians. It extends work previously presented in Yates, Partridge and Bruce (2009), and Yates et al. (2012).

The term HIL was first introduced into professional discourse in 2003 by the Medical Library Association (MLA) Task Force on Health Information Literacy. The MLA provided a working definition of HIL: "the set of abilities needed to recognize a health information need; identify likely information sources and use them to retrieve relevant information; assess the quality of the information and its applicability to a specific situation; and analyse, understand, and use the information to make good health decisions" (MLA, 2003). HIL has been used in both popular and scholarly literature (Burnham & Peterson, 2005; Cullen, 2005), however HIL presently has no developed theoretical or conceptual base. Developing such a base offers benefits to both professionals and individuals in various ways, including guiding how health information is designed and presented for optimum learning, and providing a suite of approaches to choose from when learning about health.

Consumer Health Information (CHI) research emanates from multiple disciplines including medicine, public health, communication science, and library and information science. It has focused on three areas of enquiry: health information behaviour, health literacy and health communica-

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