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Exploring variation in the ways of experiencing health information literacy: A phenomenographic study

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ABSTRACT

From a relational perspective of information literacy, health information literacy is interpreted as the different ways in which people experience using information to learn about health. Phenomenography was used as a research approach to explore variation in people's experience of using information to learn about health from data collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings identify seven categories that describe the qualitatively different ways in which people experience health information literacy: building a new knowledge base; weighing up information; discerning valid information; paying attention to bodily information; staying informed about health; Participating in learning communities, and envisaging health. These findings can be used to enhance awareness about the different ways of experiencing health information literacy, and to contribute to a nascent trajectory of research that has explored information literacy within the context of everyday life.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in the concept of information literacy within different contexts. Specifically the emergence of the term "health information literacy" attests to this interest and has elevated awareness about the importance of information literacy in health related situations (e.g., Burnham & Peterson, 2005; Cullen, 2005). In addition there has been a recognised need to broaden investigations of information literacy into settings beyond library or educational contexts where research has predominantly been conducted. Here research into information literacy within everyday life or community settings has been identified as a signficant gap for enquiry (Lloyd & Williamson, 2008; Partridge, Bruce, & Tilley, 2008). To date there has been limited research undertaken to investigate the idea of health information literacy within the context of people's everyday lives. This research adopted a relational perspective of health information literacy to explore variation in the ways that people experienced using information to learn about health in course of day-to-day life.

2. Problem statement

Information literacy is a concept that may be ascribed with different meanings, which are based upon alternative theoretical perspectives (Limberg, Sundin, & Talja, 2012). These perspectives offer different understandings of the meaning of information literacy and influence the way in which research into information literacy is conducted. The relational perspective considers that the meaning of information literacy may be understood from the various ways in which it is experienced by the information user, and interprets information literacy as the different ways in which people experience using information to learn (Bruce, 1997, 2008). As a theoretical framework for information literacy research, the relational perspective has been recognised for its value in providing wider interpretations and offering different insights into information literacy (Bruce & Hughes, 2010). In addition, studies of information literacy from this perspective also allow for a comparison of the views of this phenomenon from different standpoints (Limberg et al., 2012), and acknowledge the importance of attending to context in information literacy research, particularly when studied outside of formal educational environments (Lloyd & Williamson, 2008).

More specifically, this perspective in information literacy research has been credited for its capacity to elicit richer and expanded understandings of what people perceive as information in various contexts. Within the context of health and healthcare, greater knowledge about the kinds of information people may experience as informing can be used to inform the expansion and diversification of approach to health information provision, as well as support new opportunities regarding the design or dissemination of consumer health information. In the same way, research findings from studies into information literacy from a relational perspective have also been recognised for their potential to enhance approaches to information literacy education (Bruce & Hughes, 2010; Limberg et al., 2012). Through revealing the variation in people's experiences of health information literacy, research findings provide an evidence base that depicts a spectrum of possible ways in which the content and way of learning may be experienced. These findings can be used to inform and expand existing approaches and

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curricula for community based educational endeavours concerning people's engagement with health information.

Surprisingly, to date there has been limited research undertaken from a relational perspective into health information literacy. This gap underscores the merits of and need for research that investigates the following question: What are the qualitatively different ways in which people experience health information literacy?

3. Literature review

As a focus for research, health information literacy may be considered as a distinctive and complementary object of study to foci such as health information behaviour or health literacy. Health information behaviour is an area of research enquiry that investigates distinct behaviours through which individuals acquire health information (e.g. seeking, scanning, avoidance) (Case, 2007), while health literacy as an object of study focuses on literacy skills, such as reading proficiency, prose literacy, and numeracy, which support people's cognitive apprehension of health information (Berkman, Davis, & McCormack, 2010).

To date, research into health information literacy as an object of study has focused on understandings of information literacy from a conventional cognitivist perspective. From this perspective information literacy is interpreted as a generic set of knowledge and skills that people should exhibit (Limberg et al., 2012). In contrast, when health information literacy is interpreted from a relational perspective it investigates the different ways in which people experience using information to learn, and therefore emphasises uncovering variation in how the information user experiences health information literacy (Bruce & Hughes, 2010). The intent of this review is not to provide an exhaustive overview of research across these three domains, but to instead offer an overview of the emerging research space of health information literacy, and studies that have examined this phenomenon within the context of people's everyday lives.

There have been several studies undertaken to assess people's health information literacy. Eriksson-Backa (2010) and Eriksson-Backa, Ek, Niemelä, and Huotari (2012) examined the everyday life health information literacy of persons aged 65–79 years. Using self-administered questionnaires, these studies assessed people's health information literacy through questions about perceived ability to identify a health information need, confidence in being able to find and use health information, preferences for health information sources, and determining information quality. Niemelä, Ek, Eriksson-Backa, and Huotari (2012) also report on empirical testing of a screening tool used with secondary students to classify people's skills in health information literacy. This 10-item tool was a self-administered questionnaire designed to detect people with problems relating to interest and motivation to find health information, confidence in finding, understanding and using health information, and skills in evaluating health information.

Marshall and Williams (2006) investigated one aspect of health information literacy by examining whether and how people evaluated the quality of health information accessed through the Internet and in printed formats. Data was collected through information review groups, where participants were asked to discuss what they liked and disliked about a particular set of health information materials, and to also discuss more generally what they regarded as indicators of good or bad quality health information.

Finally, the Net.Weight Study conducted by Marshall, Henwood, and Guy (2012) is another example of research into health information literacy within the context of everyday life. This study investigated information use and information literacy among adults in the United Kingdom who were endeavouring to manage their weight. Using surveys and focus groups data was collected to investigate people's information landscapes, their information skills and their use of information and communication technologies in the context of weight management.

4. Methodology

Phenomenography, the approach used for the current study, explores the qualitatively different ways in which people experience phenomena or situations around them (Marton & Pang, 2008). Phenomenography was primarily developed by educational researchers in Sweden during the 1970s, and as a research approach it has historically been concerned with exploring questions relating to learning and understanding (Marton & Booth, 1997). Central to phenomenography is the premise that people's understanding of a phenomenon can be found in a number of qualitatively different but interrelated ways. The phenomenographic approach therefore provides a lens through which it is possible to learn "how the world appears to others, … what the world is like, and what the world could be like" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 13). Consequently this approach places emphasis on exploring variation in the ways people experience a particular phenomenon and providing experiential descriptions that reveal this variation.

4.1. Participants

The research sample comprised 23 participants. All participants were citizens of the greater Brisbane area of Queensland, Australia and aged between 47 to 64 years. This specific age cohort was selected as it comprises a significant percentage of Australia's population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012) and is identifed as a worthwhile focus for research attention with regards to health (Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC)'s, 2003). Participants were recruited through community organisations and groups that supported adult health, leisure, or hobby interests where persons aged over 45 years were likely to be found. Being mindful that the intent of a phenomenographic study is to explore variation, emphasis was placed on achieving a research sample that would attain different experiences of the phenomenon. This was achieved through monitoring the sample to esnure there was a balance of male and female participants, and variation in the age distribution of participants and current or former occupation (Yates, 2013).

4.2. Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. Open-ended questions were used to allow participants to describe their own experiences of health information literacy, along with unstructured probes to further investigate the responses participants provided (Åkerlind, Bowden, & Green, 2005). The duration of interviews ranged from 24 to 59 min (44 min average), producing over 17 h of data and 187 pages of transcripts.

In keeping with the study's adoption of a relational perspective of health information literacy, the process of data analysis emphasised examining and uncovering variation in how people experienced using information to learn about health. Data analysis involved an iterative cycle of reviewing interview transcripts in order to identify significant variation between how participants expressed different experiences of health information literacy. This entailed searching for the different meanings participants attributed to ways of experiencing health information literacy, as well as uncovering the structural relationships between these different meanings (Åkerlind, 2003).

The intended outcome of a phenomenographic data analysis is the identification of a group of categories, also referred to as categories of description, that depict the qualitatively different ways in which the phenomenon is experienced (Marton & Booth, 1997). Each category comprises a descriptive collection of the key aspects of a particular way of experiencing a phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2003). Phenomenographic categories are regarded as an aggregation of the experiences of multiple individuals, and denote groupings of a particular way of experiencing a phenomenon, rather than groupings of people. Therefore categories refer to a collective rather than