

Supporting the Unmet Information Needs of Australian Men Experiencing Stressful Life Events. A Social Justice Imperative

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Abstract: This paper reports qualitative research that investigated strategies for more effective delivery of information to support the health outcomes and community engagement of Australian men, a group who have poor health outcomes and high suicide rates. Based on the research findings this paper will discuss the social justice imperative that Australian librarians enhance their commitment to the delivery of information in the world of the everyday.

Keywords: Information seeking; information literacy; men; human information behaviour; qualitative studies; sense-making; everyday life information.

1. Introduction

Men die in Australia, on average, at 77.8 years, six years younger than the 83.9 years for women (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010b). Compared with women, men in most age groups have higher mortality rates for stroke, diabetes, cancers, ischaemic heart disease, bronchitis, emphysema, injury, poisoning, accidents and drug dependence (Verrinder & Denner, 2000). Studies both in Australia and overseas have shown that men in countries with a dominant Anglo culture are also more likely than women to have unhealthy lifestyles, drink and smoke excessively, eat a less healthy diet and engage in risk-taking and/or aggressive activities that affect their health outcomes (Connell, 1995; Griffiths, 1996).

While the statistics for general health outcomes for Australian men are poor, statistics for male suicide, compared to women, are also of considerable concern. The Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that throughout the period 1998 to 2007 the male age-standardised suicide death rate was approximately four times higher than the corresponding female rate: 13.9 per 100,000 standard population compared with 4.0 per 100,000 for women (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010a). The role of relationship breakdown as a factor in the high rates of suicide for men in the 25-44 age group has been suggested by a number of studies (Baume, Cantor, & McTaggart, 1998; Cantor & Slator, 1995). The risk of suicide in men post separation is of particular concern when the issue is

considered in light of the occurrence of far higher female initiated separation in Australia (Headley, 2006).

Notwithstanding these obvious poor physical and mental health outcomes, research also shows that Australian men are reluctant to seek help during stressful life events and face particular barriers in accessing information and support at such times, and across the lifespan more generally (Australia. Department of Health and Ageing, 2009; Connell, 1999). This research is, fundamentally, an investigation of the information literacy of Australian men.

Many women have been surprised that this research was undertaken given, what appears to be, the superior position of men in Australian society. To say that some are hostile to this avenue of research is somewhat of an understatement. But it was and continues to be the view of this researcher that the statistics speak for themselves, and that solving this problem, and supporting the health and wellbeing of Australian men by the delivery of appropriate information and support is a social justice imperative. If men are the dominant force in Australian society and large numbers of them are mentally or physically ill then a reasonable correlation would be to suggest that the society as a whole is not well placed to be healthy.

When beginning this research it was of particular concern that those seeking to support the health and wellbeing of Australian men by providing information products and allied services are not trained to do so, and this information product development and service delivery is largely ineffective. In most of community agencies in Australia this work is undertaken by a range of other non-library professionals, para-professionals, and volunteers including; nurses, social workers, community psychologists, group workers, welfare workers and volunteers from a range of backgrounds. These agencies are largely supported by cyclical government funding and public donations and are consequently under resourced in a wide range of domains, including information delivery strategies. The terms “information literacy” and “human information behaviour” are largely unknown in these organisations, and information product development and delivery practices take no account of it.

The researcher’s experience working within such agencies has shown that in Australia there has been little critique, or evaluation, of the relevance of the library and information professionals to support the information needs of the community within the world of the everyday. Internationally this work has been undertaken over many decades by the eminent scholars Brenda Dervin and Edwina Chatman. Continuing this tradition, further research to examine and critique information needs and use in non-library settings has also been conducted in the USA and Canada (Fisher, Erdelez, & McKechnie, 2005; Harris & Dewdney, 1994; Information School of Washington, 2012; McKechnie, Baker, Greenwood, & Julien, 2002, McKechnie & Pettigrew, 2002). Other studies have been conducted in Scandinavia (Palsdottir, 2005; Savolainen, 1995) but in Australia there has not been any significant investment in this line of enquiry.

The research investigation reported here revealed that there is a lack of statistical data about the work roles of librarians supporting the provision of everyday life information at the state or national level in Australia, either in libraries or elsewhere. There are also very clear indications that there has been a significant shift away from the provision of everyday life information by the library and information profession in Australia since the 1980s.

Although realizing particular concerns about the access to adequate information by men experiencing stress or duress in their lives, this research was also an attempt to reinvigorate a conversation about the significant role that Australian library professionals (and libraries more broadly) can play in the important work of delivery of everyday life information (Wellstead, 2010). It was also an attempt to reengage the profession with the social justice frameworks which were foundational elements of the development of public library movement.

2. Method and Scope

The research consists of a qualitative study which had as its core a narrative study of the information behaviour of a group of Australian men who identified themselves as having a stressful life event for which they needed information and support. A smaller narrative study of a group of professionals who support men experiencing stress was also conducted.

“Sense-making” was chosen as the research method. “Sense-making” is a highly regarded tool for investigating human information behaviour. This method calls on many of the other qualitative research methods for process but its ultimate strength for this project was the capacity for the participants to ‘tell their stories’ in a way which made sense for them rather than responding to predetermined parameters. Sense-making also seeks to critique human situations by examining gaps and barriers across time and space which are encountered when accessing information (Dervin, 1983/2000).

Participants for the study were recruited using an email broadcast from a community based agency in Western Australia that is funded support people who are experiencing stressful live events. Recipients were also asked to forward the email to others who might be interested in the study.

Initially 27 men responded to the call about the project. When provided with further information 10 of these did not respond again and 17 men opted into the research. Two of these opted out on the day of the interview citing pressure of work. Attempts to reinstate these interviews were not successful.

Data was initially gathered from the men using a short demographic questionnaire. A sense-making interview was the secondary component of the study. In the final stage the men were provided with a take home self-completion sheet to allow them to share more personal reflections on their information behaviour in terms of social connectivity and friendship networks.

Demographic data collected from the fifteen men revealed a wide range backgrounds and life experience (see Table 1).

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Age | The age range of the men was 32-63 |
| Educational level | Varied across a range from completing Year 10 (leaving school age 15) to post-graduate university qualifications; |
| Place of residence | Varied across a range from outer urban/semi-rural to inner city. |
| Employment status | Varied across a range from casual work, home duties, public service, professional, to owning a business |
| Number of children | Only one of the participants did not have children |
| Employment | No men were currently working in blue collar industries, although a number had done so in the past |
| Relationships 1 | Only three of the fifteen participants identified having had only one partner during his adult life; two of these relationships were no longer intact (so the men were single again) and the third had separated and reunited |
| Relationships 2 | Four of the men had been married or partnered three times or more. [Note: the term partner was used to identify significant relationship bonds; casual “dating type” relationships were excluded]. |

Table 1: Demographics of help-seeking men

The men indicated that they had previously needed information to navigate a variety of life situations (see Table 2).

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Participant 1 | Relationship breakdown, custody issues |
| Participant 2 | Relationship breakdown, custody issues |
| Participant 3 | Relationship breakdown |
| Participant 4 | Relationship breakdown |
| Participant 5 | Relationship breakdown, custody issues |
| Participant 6 | Relationship breakdown, custody issues |
| Participant 7 | Wife’s alcohol addiction |
| Participant 8 | Custody issues |
| Participant 9 | Alcohol addiction |
| Participant 10 | Death of young wife, support with care of 2-year old son |
| Participant 11 | Relationship issues |
| Participant 12 | Tried to kill himself twice |
| Participant 13 | Life threatening illness |
| Participant 14 | Move to Australia to enhance wife’s career by becoming principal parent; lack of social and emotional support |
| Participant 15 | Relationship breakdown |

Table 2: Issues for which the men needed help

The interviews took between 45 and 90 minutes. The interview collected data on the use of formal information and support services, as well as use of informal networks such as family, friends and colleagues. It also sought data on use of

information *things* such as books, pamphlets and websites and awareness of public information campaigns such as television advertising and billboards which seek to alert the community to sources of information and help.

3. Results

The men demonstrated a range of information behaviour during their help seeking episode but there were, however, common themes:

1. They were resistant to early information gathering and prefer to act autonomously;
2. They were not generally aware of the information or supports and services available in the community to assist them to enhance their wellbeing when under stress, or more habitually;
3. They reported that women provided a pivotal role in facilitating their information use and supporting them into help, and in encouraging them to adopt more positive behaviour which will enhance wellbeing. The men also perceive that women receive more help during periods of life stress and across the life span more generally;
4. They used family and friends as principal sources of information, help and support, and that *information things* such as books and supportive articles in printed media were also important sources of information. They were often directed to these *information things* by family and friends, often women;
5. They reported that privacy and credibility, both perceptions of their own and that of the source of the information, were key determinants of the decision to seek information and support;
6. They want information and support provided in particularly “masculine” ways and perceived that the increasing feminisation of the helping professions had led to an anti-male bias in support options;
7. As yet the Internet is not generally a credible source of supportive information. Nor are social marketing campaigns effective as tools for information delivery (notwithstanding the wholesale use of the method of information delivery by government and community agencies); and
8. They believe men need to ask more of each other in terms of their behaviour and personal accountability to ensure the health and wellbeing of themselves, their families, and their communities. The need to support younger men in this endeavour was strongly felt.

The professionals who took part in the research largely agreed that these were familiar themes for the men to whom they offer help and support and could, therefore, be broadly extrapolated to Australian men at large.

What was also clear from the narrative of the help seeking men and the professionals is that the timing of information delivery is of utmost importance during a help seeking episode. It is clear that there is a significant period of denial and avoidance of information, as well as periods of regression and

stagnation once information seeking has begun. During these times many men are either doing nothing to change their situation, or are trying to work things out for themselves. For some of the men this was anecdotally called the “I don’t want to talk about it” or “stop having a go at me” phase. The professionals interviewed also agreed that this phase can be protracted for many men and is a major obstacle to early information seeking and obtaining timely support. This phase is an important component of the help seeking experience and needs to be accounted for when attempting to provide information and support to Australian men.

The key finding of the research is that Australian men face particular challenges in terms of their information literacy, especially as it relates to obtaining information and support during periods of life stress. It was also clearly identified that men rely heavily on women during these help seeking episodes.

Questions arise as a result of these findings: what sort of information literacy training do Australian men need, who is best to provide it, where and how. If we live in the “information age” why is information difficult to obtain for some groups in society, and why are library professionals largely seen as irrelevant in the quest to locate information to support the world of the everyday for many of these groups.

4. Conclusions

Statistical data show that Australian men have markedly poorer health than women, and commit suicide at 4-5 times the rate of females. In order for Australian society to be functional and positive it needs its men to be well.

Given the reports of those who took part in this research Australian men are an underserved population in terms of information delivery, especially during periods of stress and ill health. Taking into account the views and opinions of both the help-seeking men and professionals in this study would go some way to addressing this unmet need. Participants have provided clear action orientated ideas for ways that information could be provided to men in ways that would better meet their needs and lead to more equity in terms of service delivery and support. There are perceptions that women receive more help than men during periods of stress or ill health, and services are set up to more readily take account of women’s needs. If this is indeed the case, and the professionals agreed that it is, it raises serious concerns in terms of justice, equity and fairness within Australian society. “A socially-just society is one in which individuals and groups are treated fairly and enjoy an equal share in that society’s benefits” (Rioux, 2010, p. 11) and it goes without saying that this must be all the more the case when access impacts on health and wellbeing.

As with so many things in our profession the decision to use or not use our services is often a case of perception; both that held by our clients (and potential clients) about us, and those we hold about them. Scholars in the field of everyday life information have been airing these concerns for many years. As early as 1977 Brenda Dervin whose sense-making theory forms the

methodological centre of this research, suggested that there are serious implications for the library and information profession if it continued to see itself in terms of a normative view of information and service (Dervin, 1977).

Ten years later, when attempting to draw attention to the narrow “library based” focus of our profession in Australia a leading academic librarian wrote:

By failing to become involved in our society and its vital needs our profession is abrogating its responsibilities. In fact one could argue that no librarian is in any real position to question involvement in the critical social issues of the day because by the very nature of our professional calling one is bound to be implicated anyway (Henderson, 1988, p. 107).

Instead of library and information practitioners and researchers “acting within the ivory tower role [e.g. we know what you need], they should form true partnerships with information user groups in order to bring about positive change and empowerment” (Rioux, 2010, p. 14). These values are driven by a concept of social justice as a normative tool. It is important that library and information science educators, researchers and practitioners discover ways to expand curricula, theories and practices in order to achieve this end. As an example, further research and enhanced praxis is needed on how to improve the information literacy of Australian men, especially when they are experiencing stress or duress. Narrative studies present considerable opportunities to enhance our understanding of the “information worlds” of both users and non-users of libraries and other information gathering places. With these data we can design curricula which train our practitioners adequately, and develop services to meet real needs. This is a social justice imperative in a world with an increasingly dynamic information environment.

So what are action orientated social justice related activities librarians can develop in order to better engage with the social justice dimensions of our professional mandate? As a first priority developing an understanding of the variety of information exchange relationships that are operant in different sections of the community, particularly as they relate to help seeking, librarians can better support community agencies to develop information delivery strategies that engage these diverse groups, including men. Building partnerships with these agencies in order to share the knowledge base of our profession is paramount in order to achieve high quality information product development and service delivery. Enhancing this knowledge base was the key intent of the research reported in this paper; using the premise that information is not an end in itself but rather a tool which must be acted upon to achieve personal and community change. It is this social change that should be at the core of our service delivery; we should be attempting to meet the information needs of those who do not currently use our services by outreach, partnerships and rebranding; perceptions need to be changed, and barriers removed.

It is the central premise of this research that the effective delivery and acquisition of information is a significant component of any call to a social

justice agenda. The researcher believes like other writers “that the acquisition of information can have implications for human dignity, for confidence and self help [and that] information helps tackle tyranny of the articulate over the inarticulate” Martin, 1982, p. 136) . The men who took part in this research were unanimous in their agreement that they were inarticulate in regards to their information needs, and their lives were diminished by this. There is clearly a social justice imperative in providing adequate information to men to improve their health and wellbeing.

In the Australian context librarians and information professionals have a considerable role to play in this endeavour. We must embrace again the provision of everyday life information in our libraries, we must market our skills in other domains, and engage the community with the worth of information literacy for all, but particularly in those groups where we see unmet need. It is not enough to offer services to those who seek us out, we must again become advocates for our “non-users” and attempt to address their needs.

And we must engage our students in this endeavour. We who are educators must recognize the narrow boundaries that shape the way knowledge of our professional roles are shared our recruitment of students and our teaching, and our complicity in this process. When we address this attitude we will allow our pedagogy to be radically changed in order to give our students what they desire and deserve (Hooks, 1994, p. 44). If your teaching is dynamic and client focused, our libraries and information services will be dynamic and client focused and better able to meet the challenges that confront us in terms of providing information in ways that are equitable and just, in libraries and elsewhere. This style of information delivery has the power to transform lives and there can be no greater pursuit for our profession.

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