

## Information sharing in leisure: Connecting through storytelling

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### Abstract

This paper examines the role of information sharing in leisure activities by highlighting the findings of two qualitative studies. Both studies explore whether storytelling in leisure settings can connect members of marginalized communities to others and to their own identities. Implications for public libraries and information behaviour research are discussed.

Leisure, or enjoyable free-time activities, is a growing area of interest for information studies researchers, who have begun to examine the rich informational practices associated with both individual and shared leisure pursuits. Work to date has examined serious leisure and the information practices of hobby gourmet cooks (Hartel, 2010), amateur genealogists (Fulton, 2009), leisure reading (Ross, 1999), knitting (Prigoda & McKenzie, 2007), food blogging (Cox & Blake, 2011), coin collecting (Case, 2009), quilting (Gainor, 2013), and backpacking (Chang, 2009). Though these studies lay the groundwork for our understanding of the habits and strategies used by leisure participants, many focus on the information seeking and management of individuals pursuing solitary activities. Fewer have explored the nature of information sharing in group leisure settings, and the ways in which this sharing can be supported or hindered: a notable exception is Prigoda & McKenzie's (2007) study of a public library knitting program. In their research, they found that women from the group built friendships, and sought and shared information on a wide variety of topics. The authors observed that the knitting projects members worked on offered a safe way to start conversations, and that connections women formed in the group included those that cut across social and economic boundaries (Prigoda & McKenzie, 2007).

As Prigoda and McKenzie's (2007) work demonstrates, group leisure settings have vast potential as sites of information sharing, for the building of social capital (Putnam, 1995), and the breaking down of barriers between members of different groups in society. This can be especially important for people who are marginalized or isolated, including groups such as recent immigrants and seniors. Despite the relevance of this topic for information studies research, in particular the role that public libraries, community centres, and other places can play in fostering social capital and supporting community-building (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003; Johnson, 2012; Oldenburg, 1999), relatively little research has examined what information sharing looks like in these types of enjoyable and sociable activities. Fisher and Naumer's (2006) exploration of information grounds in social settings is one example. Though the authors do not explicitly discuss leisure as a conceptual framing for information sharing, the voluntary participation of individuals in activities such as choirs and other hobby activities is noted, and distinguished from other settings that participants do not freely choose, such as elevators or doctor's office waiting rooms (Fisher & Naumer, 2006). The findings in this paper build on our understanding of information grounds and information behaviour in leisure to determine what constitutes – and what can hinder – information sharing in leisure settings. How do individuals choose to take part in activities such as library storytelling programs, and how is their participation influenced by factors such as their cultural background, the physical setting, and the formation (or non-

formation) of trust (Chatman, 1992) among participants? In deeply multicultural and multiethnic spaces in urban centres such as Toronto, for example, or in cross-generational settings, do people come together or remain separate, share or withhold information in leisure? Can public libraries facilitate the sharing of information in leisure settings?

This paper engages with these questions and gaps in information behaviour research by presenting the findings of two empirical, qualitative studies of information sharing in leisure. Both studies used in-depth interviews and participant observation to examine the role of storytelling in leisure in potentially marginalized communities in Toronto, Ontario: participants included seniors and immigrant adults attending public library programs, and refugee youth in broader community organizations.

The findings demonstrate that information shared in leisure, whether through traditional forms of storytelling within newcomer communities, or in mixed ethnic groups in library programming, offered opportunities for the creation of both bridging and bonding social capital. Bridging social capital, or the forming of connections across different social groups, occurred as information was shared among members of the library program; this included information about useful local resources. Bonding social capital, or the strengthening of ties within a community, was also noted. Young newcomers, in particular, pointed out the ways in which intergenerational storytelling within their cultural group helped them to maintain links to their own cultural identities: for Afghan refugee youth, a specific practice called “mehmani”, a ritual visiting between and among family groups, was regularly associated with this type of storytelling, and considered leisurely by many youth.

What is important to note is that though some participants in library programs or community agencies shared specific characteristics with one another, either coming from a shared cultural or linguistic background, being in a similar age group or life stage, or having a similar family status – such as being a young parent – these characteristics did not equal immediate connections or trust between individuals. This finding was echoed in interviews with refugee youth in community agencies, who noted that they feared becoming the subject of local gossip, and therefore preferred to socialize and share information with others outside their newcomer community.

This paper contributes to existing research on information behaviour by introducing the framework of leisure in information sharing research. It also explores the implications of findings on storytelling for existing conceptual approaches in the field, such as information poverty and information grounds, as well as for public library program guidelines.

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