

A Place for Us? Baby boomers, their elders, and the public library: a proposal for the Research round table

Abstract: As Canada's population ages, a growing subset of aging baby boomers is providing care and companionship to elders. What role does the public library play as a place in the lives of these patrons? This qualitative research project seeks to understand the characteristics and behaviours of this user group.

Résumé : Avec le vieillissement de la population canadienne, un nombre croissant de baby-boomers vieillissant prennent soins et s'occupent du bien-être des aînés. Quel est le rôle des bibliothèques publiques dans la vie de ces usagers? Ce projet de recherche qualitatif cherche à comprendre les caractéristiques et les comportements de ce groupe d'usagers.

This proposal is to present research undertaken for a Master's thesis in the School of Information Studies, University of Ottawa. This thesis combines two emerging interests in LIS scholarship and practice: public library preparation for demographic change as the baby boom generation begins to reach retirement age (eg, Joseph 2006; Sloan, 2010; Williamson et al, 2006), and the growing use of "place" as a way to understand the meaning and value of libraries in patrons' lives (eg., Leckie & Hopkins, 2002; Schull, 2010). The goal of this proposed study is to better understand the experience of one subset of baby boomer public library patrons, those caring for elders, using the "library as place" as the framework.

For the purpose of this study, "carers" provide care and/or companionship to a person of the next older generation (10 or more years older). According to the Vanier Institute of the Family, more than 29% of women aged 45 to 54 are "carers" to at least one senior (VIF 2010); census data tells us that seniors over 65 make up the fastest growing segments of the Canadian population, suggesting the number of carers will both grow and age. With a significant number of boomers providing care and companionship to elders, this study proposes that, just as public libraries traditionally provide services to support the family "cluster" (parents with children) - it might be fruitful to consider clusters at the other end of the age spectrum: boomers in their caring relationship with elders.

Given the aging boomer population and increased longevity, it is clear that the term "older adults" encompasses a very broad spectrum of attitudes, expectations, and abilities. The multigenerational aspect of the aging population and its impact on public library service has been little addressed by researchers; by focusing on boomer library patrons and their relationship with elders, the proposed study aims to fill in part of the picture, and contribute to a new paradigm of understanding library services to older adults.

This research proposes to investigate the role and value of the library as a place for this user group during a historic transition from physical to digital information services. While libraries have begun to create rich online environments, their physical presence in communities is one of their strengths and distinguishing features. A question for the boomer generation in this transitional period is how they value the physical presence of the library vs. the virtual service it provides, in relation to their role as carers.

The key research questions this study will attempt to answer are:

- What role does the public library play as a place in the lives of baby boomers who provide care and/or companionship to elders?
- What are the characteristics, needs, and behaviours of this growing segment of the population served by public libraries?

The exploratory nature of the research questions suggests that a qualitative methodological approach to research design is appropriate.

This research has been conceived as a pilot for a larger study. The pilot would unfold in two phases, each using qualitative interviewing as the main data collection method. The first phase is a set of long-form qualitative interviews with a small number of baby boomer carers who are library users, on the role public libraries play in their lives. An ethnographic approach will be applied to participant selection. The second phase will involve interviews with experts from relevant professions (eg, librarianship; Ottawa Council on Aging) in anticipation of a larger Delphi study. The second phase will attempt to make some educated predictions about the impact on and implications for public library service of this growing user group.

This research is at a preliminary stage: a proposal has been accepted, and ethics approval is being sought. By June, it is anticipated that the participant interviews and ongoing analysis will be underway. Feedback on methodology, data analysis, and ways of “telling the story” would be particularly useful at this time.

References

Buschman, John and Gloria J. Leckie, eds . 2006. *Library as Place: History, Community and Culture*. Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited.

Joseph, Mylee. 2006. Active, engaged, valued: Older people and public libraries in New South Wales. *Australian Public Libraries and Information Services*, 19(3), 113-117.

Leckie, G. J., & Hopkins, J. 2002. The public place of central libraries: Findings from Toronto and Vancouver. *Library Quarterly*, 72(3), 326.

Rothstein, P. & Schull, D.D. Eds. 2010. *Boomers and Beyond; Reconsidering the role of Libraries* (vii). Chicago: ALA.

Schull, D. 2010. The Library as Place in an aging society. In Rothstein, P. & Schull, D.D., Eds., *Boomers and Beyond; Reconsidering the role of Libraries* (79-94). Chicago: ALA.

Sloan, M. 2010. Next chapters: Public libraries and older adults. *Library + Information Update*, Pp.20-22.

Vanier Institute for the Family (2010). *Families count : profiling Canada's families IV*.
Retrieved from
http://www.vifamily.ca/media/webfmloads/Publications/Families_Count/Families_Count.pdf

Williamson, K., Bannister, M., Makin, L., Johanson, G., Schauder, D., & Sullivan, J. 2006. 'Wanting it now': Baby boomers and the public library of the future. *Australian Library Journal*, 55(1), 54-72.

Williamson, K., Bannister, M., & Sullivan, J. 2010. The crossover generation: Baby boomers and the role of the public library. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 42(3), 179-190. doi:10.1177/0961000610368917