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# Baby boomers, their elders and the public library

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Canada’s aging population is expected to have an impact on all public institutions; for public libraries, the emergence of a large, multi-generational user group of older adults challenges the current paradigm of services to seniors. The purpose of this paper is to report on the reflections of a small sample of baby boomers and how the public library-as place contributes to their caring relationships with their elders.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study examined a subset of baby boomer library patrons who are in caring relationships with elders. The study is theoretically framed by the ethic of care and emerging theories of library-as-place grounded in human geography and sociology. An instrumental case study of seven carers in an urban Canadian city was conducted, using long form interviews.

**Findings** – Findings suggest that while these baby boomer respondents value their libraries deeply, there is potential to create services and practices more attuned to the needs of older adults who are in relationships with elders.

**Research limitations/implications** – As a single case of a small sample of baby boomers, this study is limited by its size, scope and geography. The direct voices of the elders could not practically be incorporated into this study and should be considered in future research.

**Originality/value** – This study offers an alternate framework to library-as-place studies based on a specific profile of “older adult” library users. It examines the library needs and uses of a small but rapidly growing sector of many public library communities. Older adults can be seen by libraries as two distinct demographic groups – the very old (elders) and their younger peers (baby boomers).

**Keywords** Canada, Baby boomer generation, Public libraries, Elderly people, Elders, Library users, Ethic of care, Library as place

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

A recognized demographic phenomenon of post-WW2 is known as the “baby boom” and represents a population cohort now moving into the later stages of the human lifespan. The first wave of this demographic cohort in Canada achieved the retiring age of 65 in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2007). As boomers confront the landscape of this life chapter, they find they are not alone. Although much smaller in numbers, parents of this cohort, older adults themselves, are experiencing longer life and thus represent yet another older cohort. Canada’s 2006 census found that seniors aged 85 and older are the fastest growing segment of the over-65 population in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008, 2010). For many baby boomers, then, their own experience of aging often includes the experience of providing care to someone older than they are, and in doing so, baby boomers find themselves addressing both their own, and their elders’ needs (Duxbury *et al.*, 2009; Joseph, 2006; Kahlert, 2000; Vanier Institute for the Family, 2010).

For public libraries whose mission is to serve all citizens, the user group known as “seniors” is more loosely (American Library Association – ALA, 2008; Canadian Library Association – CLA, 2009) understood. The aging of the population and the



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lengthening of life spans call for innovations in how public library services recognize this burgeoning population because “the current paradigm of library services for ‘seniors’ does not match the characteristics and potential contributions of the baby boomer generation” (ALC and IMLS, 2005, p. 7). While some overlap has been identified between the generations that make up older adults, boomers are expected to move into this category with some significantly different needs and attitudes from the generation that preceded theirs (Decker, 2010; Williamson, 2009; Williamson *et al.*, 2006a, b, 2010).

These demographic changes prompt a re-assessment of all aspects of public library services but perhaps most immediately from the perspective of the public library-as-place in all of its physical, digital, psychological, spatial, private and public experiential uses (Aabo and Audunson, 2012; Audunson, 2005; Black, 2011; Buschman and Leckie, 2006; Evjen and Audunson, 2009; Given and Leckie, 2003; McKechmie *et al.*, 2004, 2007; Most, 2011). Given the ongoing debates surrounding the future of the public library in this digital age and given recent political and fiscal pressures on many communities to re-structure or close public libraries particularly in the UK where a public inquiry on library closures has been initiated[1], additional perspectives on the changing conceptualization and practices of the public library-as-place are needed.

This study reports on the reflections of a small sample ( $n = 7$ ) of baby boomers and how the public library-as-place contributes to their caring relationships with their elders, recorded in a series of semi-structured, long-form interviews and with the aid of reflection guides. Although limited in scope by the number of participants, the local setting and the exploratory nature, this study introduces this caring-library relationship within the established public library-as-place framework to LIS research and practice. Moreover, it provides evidence, however preliminary, that may justify revising models of library services to older adults and that add to the framework of the public-library-as-place. A contribution is also made to our understanding of what the multi-generational nature of the aging population might imply for the ongoing relevancy of public library spaces and services.

### Literature review

These brief references to selected Canadian demographic trends establishes the rationale for why public libraries should anticipate a significantly larger “older adult” population that will make demands on their services in future. The following literature review highlights critical research and central concepts which frame this study. They include:

- library services to older adults;
- womens’ social interactions and the ethic of care; and
- human geography and the public library-as-place.

#### *Library services to older adults*

A body of recent research and professional literature on this topic (Joseph, 2006, 2009; Kahlert, 2000; Williamson, 2009) originates in the Australian context. Williamson *et al.* (2010) observe that there may be crossover in characteristics and values between boomers and the older generation, although there are enough differences that “the retirement of the Baby boomers requires innovative responses on the part of Public Libraries” (p. 188).

A series of studies (Williamson *et al.*, 2006a, b, 2010), has investigated the characteristics of baby boomers, and what impact their aging might have on Australian public libraries.

Informed by the 1999 version of the ALA guidelines for library services to older adults, North American researchers (Piper *et al.*, 2009) note a lack of specifically targeted programs, and gaps in services and leadership opportunities for older adults, but also note that older adult study participants are generally satisfied nevertheless. Decker (2010) focuses on the changing social, programming, and technological needs that nimble library services could address in order to retain engagement of older adults.

In recent policy statements, both the ALA and the CLA have also addressed the need to reorient older adult services. The Canadian guidelines on library and information services for older adults (2009) note generational differences in this population, acknowledge the large numbers of aging baby boomers, and recognize the common experiences of retirement, increased leisure, the need to re-structure daily life, and the onset of age-related physical conditions within this cohort. The Canadian guidelines comprise a comprehensive and detailed list of actions libraries can take to ensure they meet the needs of aging individuals, and are similar to the ALA's Guidelines for library and information services to older adults (2008).

A strategic planning report by Australian public libraries (Joseph, 2006) examines the potential impact on libraries of a greatly increased proportion of older people in local communities. It provides a complete legislative and policy framework for development of services to an aging population and situates this service at all jurisdictional levels from international human rights to local decision-making. The author observes that the population of the very elderly is growing and is an age group:

[...] characterised by higher dependency, increased disability and a greater need for support services to maintain independence and quality of life. The impact on libraries will be an increased demand for many of the services currently provided for seniors and clients with disabilities; including home library services, book delivery, large print, technology for low vision, hearing aid loops in meeting rooms and talking books (p. 22).

Finally, their report considers the need for the built environment to be designed to be age-friendly, including "transgenerational design" which takes into account age-related impairments and limitations, and "universal design" which, as much as possible, limits the need for adaptation or specialization to meet diverse abilities (p. 35).

#### *Ethic of care*

The ethic of care (Day, 2000; Gilligan, 1982) is a model of behaviour that considers the highest moral imperative to be taking care of the needs of, and sustaining relationships with others. One aspect of this approach is a decision-making model based on sustaining relationships as distinct from an "ethic of justice" model based on fairness, autonomy and respect for others' rights. This approach is not meant to describe a mode of behaviour that is only used by women, but it proposes that women's socialization predicts a greater likelihood of women participating in, and valuing caregiving, and defining themselves in the context of their relationships to others (Day, 2000, p. 105). The ethic of care also frames women's use and perception of public space:

Possibilities arising from women's public space activity can easily be identified in the context of the ethic of care. Possibilities include opportunities for practicing and receiving caring, and for sustaining relationships with friends, family, strangers, and public spaces (Day, 2000, p. 110).

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The implications of adopting an ethic of care in regards to public spaces include focusing decisions on specific circumstances of groups of users, location, and political situation, as well as universal principles and standards, in order to determine the most caring course of action.

### *Library-as-place*

Boomers are recognized as avid users of technology, but “study after study of user preferences and patterns reveals adults’ continuing demand for physical venues” (Gosling, as cited in Schull, 2010, p. 79). This tension between the physical (Oldenburg, 2007) and the virtual has been one impetus behind a recent focus for scholarly research into library-as-place (Audunson, 2005; Buschman and Leckie, 2006; Given and Leckie, 2003; McKechnie *et al.*, 2004; Most, 2011). “Place” takes its meaning from this humanistic definition (Osburn, 2007):

[...] a setting of any dimension and type in which an individual perceives a special spirit (*genius loci*) that is generated by the quality of experience related to the values and associations it recalls, and whose significance to the individual captures an extraordinary order and heightens related awareness that becomes an inspiration for imagination and behaviour (Osburn, 2007, p. 63).

Bounding the library-as-place as a research concept enables researchers to theorize in other ways about how library patrons actually use and value the libraries in their lives. Out of research-based “place studies” grounded in geography and in social and cultural studies (Most, 2011), library-as-place has emerged as an idea that recognizes the multi-dimensionality of the user experience, an experience composed of physical sensation, memories, expectations, identity construction, ideological perspectives. As a way to consider the library-as-place for an aging population, this approach offers “an ecological perspective, including how the library interacts with other elements of its environment and what distinguishes it within that environment” (Schull, 2010, p. 79).

The movement to study library-as-place has gained momentum as researchers have shifted their perspective from studying the roles of the user in the life of the library to studying the roles of the library in the life of the user (Most, 2011). Two studies of urban central libraries (Given and Leckie, 2003; Leckie and Hopkins, 2002) that were later replicated (May and Black, 2010; Most, 2011) investigate how people use libraries and how they feel about their libraries as places. Other research uses this library-as-place framework in various ways: to study the intersection of physical and virtual place (Aabo, 2005; Audunson, 2005); to examine the relevance of the concept of Third Place to libraries (Harris, 2003; Lawson, 2004; Fisher *et al.*, 2007); to examine how public libraries manifest the concept of the Habermasian public sphere (Alstad and Curry, 2003; Leckie and Buschman, 2007; Rooney-Browne and McMenemy, 2010), and finally to study whether in their physical presence, libraries generate social capital (Aabo and Audunson, 2012; Johnson and Griffis, 2009). A typology of five dimensions including locale, associations, experience, space and symbolism (Schull, 2010) further frames this study.

Library-as-place frames this study because it offers a rich and holistic perspective on the role of public libraries in people’s lives. In identifying place literature as a useful way to contextualize library research for an aging population, we are suggesting that library users’ experiences are multi-dimensional, comprising a range of behaviours,

activities, attachments, and memories, all of which contribute to evolving individual and collective ideas about the public library.

### **Research questions**

The following research questions address the unique character of this contemporary boomer cohort and are posed as follows:

*RQ1.* How do baby boomer public library users who provide care to elders interact with the public library?

*RQ2.* How do these users experience the library as a place?

*RQ3.* Does library usage, characteristics and behaviours of this user group suggest opportunities for further investigation?

### **Methodology**

As an instrumental case study (Stake, 2000) within a constructivist paradigm, this study did not produce results which could be generalized in any way. Instead, meaning was derived from individual experiences of the seven respondents producing a rich and detailed portrayal of one specific phenomenon of interest – the role of the public library-as-place in the lives of seven baby boomers who were in relationships of caring for one or more elders in their local community. The exploratory nature of the study in combination with practical limitations in recruiting participants explain the small sample size.

Participants were selected using theoretical sampling, an approach which seeks participation from those “who seem likely to epitomize the analytic criteria in which he or she is interested” (Warren, 2002, p. 87). To this end, all selected respondents were identified as public library users. Respondents self-identified as baby boomers, a demographic cohort defined as those born post-Second World War 1946-1964 (Statistics Canada, 2007); they were not expected to provide proof of age. Participants also needed to be actively providing care to someone at least ten years older than themselves; the decade difference was identified as an explanation of the use of the word “elder” in the criteria in order to increase the probability of generational differences and characteristics, particularly related to physical abilities and technology use.

Recruitment was incremental and involved multiple strategies of posters, e-mail, word of mouth at three libraries, a community centre and via selected community leaders. This use of snowball sampling to move from acquaintances to strangers who might provide a rich store of data (Warren, 2002, p. 88) prompted a widening of the recruitment net. Over the course of approximately five weeks seven people expressed interest and self-identified as fitting the criteria enumerated on the poster and e-mail. Following initial individual face-to-face meetings to outline details and confirm interest, two interviews were held with each respondent over an elapsed period of approximately one month for each person. All interviews were audio-recorded, and were between 30 and 60 minutes in length at locations suiting the convenience and comfort of each respondent. Respondents were interviewed using a set of open-ended questions following a semi-structured interview guide based on the key elements of the research question. Following the first interview, participants were then asked to make notes using a reflection guide to capture any subsequent ideas in

the interval between the first and second interviews. The study received prior approval from the university’s research ethics board.

Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and were coded manually in successive iterations consistent with an analytical ladder of abstraction (Patton, 1990). Table I provides summary profiles of individual respondents based on three characteristics: gender, employment status, and their relationship to their elder.

**Findings**

*Caring for the library needs of their elders*

What does it mean to provide care or companionship to an elder in the context of public libraries? Care has two overlapping dimensions: looking after needs, and sustaining relationships (Gilligan, 1982). With the single exception of a respondent who lived with a parent, these participants lived separately from the elders with whom they had caring relationships; the elders lived in retirement homes or their own houses or apartments. In other words, “care” was not about caregiving in the sense that health researchers might use (Duxbury *et al.*, 2009). The caring relationship considered in what ways, if any, the library played a part as respondents sought to meet needs of, and sustain relationships with their elders. These activities are summarized in Table II.

Some respondents in this study characterized the need for reading material as an essential aspect of their elders’ lives. “Reading had been her life” [R1], is how one respondent describes an elderly woman who went blind quite suddenly. Caring involved accessing library services so the blind friend could continue to enjoy books. “If she wants to read something, she’ll call me, and I have her card [. . .] so I will place a hold for a book”. Another elder’s appetite for books was voracious:

	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male	Female	Female
Employment status	Retired	Part time	Part time	Freelance	Seeking employment	Freelance	Retired
Elder	Vision-impaired friend	Mother in retirement home	Paid home caregiver to several elderly people	Mother in retirement home	Shares home with mother	Friend in retirement home	Mother in retirement home

**Table I.**  
Profile of carers as study participants

Elder library needs identified by carer	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7
Need for pleasure reading	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Need for information		x	x		x		
Need for assistance with bureaucracy and administration	x		x	x	x		
Need for computer assistance	x	x	x	x	x		
Need for non-book materials			x			x	
Need for book talk and reading support	x		x	x	x	x	x

**Table II.**  
Elders’ library needs identified by carers

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Every month the public library delivers [...] a big physical pile, it's huge, and she goes through those during the month, reads pretty much all of them [...] she likes her library pile [R7].

Pleasure reading, an activity "not affected by income or general functional status", has been shown to have a relationship with decreased loneliness in later life (Rane-Szostak and Herth, 1995, p. 107). Respondents demonstrated care by ensuring the need for pleasure reading was met regardless of the information format.

Surprisingly, the need for information to aid in solving problems, or "coping information" (Chatman, 1992, p. 124) was identified by only three respondents from the sample. A unique window on the information needs of seniors who live independently came from the respondent whose paid, part-time employment was caregiving:

People are always asking me how to get rid of things. Some of them are kind of odd things like walkers that are old, last week it was fluorescent lights.

Not surprisingly, however, many information needs for one elder were health-related:

If her doctor says something to her, or they change her medication, or she hears a friend tell about another medication, she tries to find out what she can about it; I know she has drug books, like, you know, the big encyclopedias, but I'm sure I could get more up to date information [R3].

Mediating the organizational bureaucracy of the library itself was a clearly defined information need, which returns as a theme in the negotiation of power and authority in the library as public place. Elders were assisted with the mechanics of such library activities as registering for a card after moving from another city, and navigating the complex system of qualifying as a "special patron" in order to access the talking books program [R4, R1, R2].

Computer assistance was required by the majority of respondents' elders for activities such as e-mail, forwarding digital videos to grandchildren or simply knowing whether the computer itself was working or whether the elder had forgotten how to use it [R3, R4]. Respondents reported of parents who tried computing but "it didn't really take" [R7]; or "she couldn't handle it" [R5]. None of the elders was reported as having accessed any of their library's online services. As libraries have expanded the range of formats in their collections, carers observed how they were engaged to acquire non-book materials such as CDs or audio-descriptive videos [R6] [R3].

Books and book talk frequently surfaced as a shared bond between respondents and their elders in this study:

When I go visit Mum Sunday, she does tend to talk about whatever books she's been reading that week, some tidbit of information, or somebody's life, she likes these travellers who've gone through Afghanistan or wherever on a donkey, or that sort of thing [R7].

A shared love of books was at the root of friendships described in these interviews, as in this comment:

[...] from time to time we would loan each other books, she loaned me her Dorothy L. Sayers mysteries, and one time we tracked down a poetry book that included selections from her school years, which was a treasure to her, and if somebody else gave her a book that she found interesting she would often loan it to us [R6].

Respondents had a finely honed appreciation for their elders' reading tastes. Descriptions of these tastes included genres and sub-genres, authors, and periods such

“historical fiction” or “Jane Austen” reads and periodically carers’ benefited from their elders’ recommendations. Relationships between carers and their elders were formed and sustained through a shared love of books and reading; one way caring was demonstrated was by this detailed attention to the elders’ tastes and interests.

#### *Carer’s understanding of their library-as-place*

Interviews were designed using an existing typology (Schull, 2010) in which place studies are presented as:

[...] a way of thinking about the library from an ecological perspective, including how the library interacts with other elements of its environment and what distinguishes it within that environment (Schull, 2010, p. 79).

Following data analysis, a five-part categorization of place dimensions emerged. The emergent typology of library-as-place relevant to these users is summarized in Table III, followed by a detailed discussion of each dimension.

1. *Physical places.* Respondents experienced libraries as “physical places of embodiment in the every day” (Buschman and Leckie, 2006, p. 12), both in their physicality and through an appreciation of their location in geographical space. This positivist approach to considering place in its tangible form framed one perspective on the library experience for this set of respondents: the library was a place they walked, drove or cycled to. However, among the elders cared for by this group of respondents, almost none physically visited the library, a result of, among other factors, physical decline.

When deciding to visit a library, geographical locale became a very important consideration even for able-bodied carers and more importantly for their elders:

Schull (2010) dimensions of library-as-place		Study findings – carers’ library-as-place	
Location in community	Identification with public and commercial infrastructure Geographic location Accessibility	Physical places	Geographic location Accessibility Design Collection organization
Individual associations	Memories Assumptions Beliefs	Personal places	Inner life Lifelong learning Sense of ownership
Experiential	Social Educational Transitional Informational Cultural	Informational places	For self On behalf of elder In support of caring role Alternative library spaces
Spatial	Physical orientation of space “Look and feel”	Places without walls	Virtual library Personalized library Lack of support
Symbolic	Public commons Instrument of democratic participation	Places of institutional power	Fines and fees Public internet access Membership Classification Employees as faces of power

**Table III.**  
Dimensions of library-as-place

No trouble to walk, or take my bike [R5].

I DO drive. One of the reasons I use (these branches) is because there are parking lots [R6].

I have been in the downtown library because it's across from my hairdressers, but that would be the only reason. There hasn't been anything I haven't been able to do (at my home branch) if I wanted [R2].

These were the kind of public realm people-to-place connections described as "paths, rounds, and ranges" (Lofland, 1998, p. 69). Most elders preferred using homebound services or having the respondent or someone else act as their mediator with the institution. For the elders, going anywhere required more decision-making, a husbanding of energy and resources, and a calculation of the tradeoffs. "She's not as strong as she used to be, she can't carry library books home" [R5].

Respondents' assistance with their elders' library use related closely to the elders' mobility. But for those carers with elders who had been lifelong library users, the branch that was a block and a half away from the retirement home might equally have been located on the other side of the city, thanks to an intervening intersection found to be "intimidating" [R4] or because of declining mobility. Physical barriers linked to emotional ones, highlighting the loss of independence that frail health can imply:

I think she didn't like riding in the (retirement home) bus. She just didn't like the way you had to pile in, and have your walker taken away and have it folded up [R6].

The physical design of space and detailing inside branches had a taken-for-granted quality. Inside a newly renovated branch before-and-after comparisons were made: "the lighting is harsher over there now [...]" [R2] "Down in the other section they really had next to nothing [...] where they had any extra space they put those paperback carousels. But it looks quite nice now" [R3]. Respondents also recognized the practical limitations noting for example, that "it wouldn't hurt if they had more of that; maybe it's the best they can do" [R6].

The physicality of a setting was experienced through its accessibility. Although branch libraries might have been compliant with legislation, details that had an impact on the quality of the library-going experience were not necessarily addressed when institutions met only these minimum requirements. Proximity and sensitive design were concerns for these users and became factors bearing on the non-use of the physical library made by their elders, whose physical decline resulted in the less frequent choice of the library as their priority destination.

*2. Personal places.* Respondents described the library as the place to which they brought powerful memories and associations, created over a half a century of library use, which lead to particular expectations about their library experiences. As individuals in relationships with elders, the respondents noticed with interest and some surprise how their own, and their elders' library attachment changed, and in some cases, disappeared, as life circumstances changed.

As these baby boomer respondents described themselves engaged in library use, the picture that often emerged was one of contemplative, private, introspective behaviour, in which the inner life was being created and re-created, and the sense of place and attachment to place were being continuously constructed. One respondent, in talking about whether the library was a social place, reacted to the question:

People are usually there in a somewhat serious mood, and a little bit introspective, it's GOOD for that, it's the place where you choose to go when you're feeling that way, or when you have some thinking to do, or when you have.

Nurturing of the inner life included sitting, browsing shelves or even checking notices on the community bulletin board for workshops and programs:

Where else would you find something that kind of has that orientation, something to do with writing, something to do with books, probably, something to do with learning, a lot of learning.

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The associations and sense of ownership also went back to childhood: "I do remember school trips [...] to [this] library. It seems it was a regular thing when I was a kid". A sense of branch ownership was pervasive even if the branch was never used in their current daily lives. Two respondents spoke with affection of libraries in other parts of the country, presenting a kind of idealized vision of the public library as a place which functioned as a community hub, where multiple user groups co-existed harmoniously, where librarians were present and helpful, and where the atmosphere was conducive to reading and browsing. This respondent spoke fondly about a public library from her past, distant in both memory and geography:

It was not [...] It was not technical. Like, they didn't have anything automated. I would say I used the librarians much more there. Why would that be? [she asks herself quietly]. Hmm. Umm [long pause] I don't know, it was a very [...] Very um [...] People-y place. That library. There were kids, you know, like, when you'd go in, the kids would be, there might be a kids circle on one side. It was probably smaller; I don't think there was a downstairs, so [...] It was a smaller branch, so the kids' activities could be happening on one side; and there're lot of seniors and there's a big senior building right across the road. So there'd often be a lot of older people sitting reading newspapers there; it was a nice branch [...] I sort of over a few years saw things like the increase in computers which is challenging, especially in a branch with lots of seniors, but I would find often the librarians helping people figure out how to use email and that sort of thing [R2].

In these settings both respondents described their use of the library shifting in response to a different atmosphere, set of characters, and physical surroundings, each constructing meaning out of the meetings of their needs and expectations with the atmosphere and offerings in each location.

The perspective of libraries as personal places that can be seen as "fluid, changeable, dynamic contexts of social interaction and memory" (Stokowski, 2002, p. 369) helps contextualize the surprise some respondents expressed as they recognized that neither they nor their elders used the public library in the ways they once did. "She doesn't go to the library very often anymore because she doesn't use books, and, the CNIB sends her discs [...]" [R2]. If this woman required a title for her book club that the CNIB[2] could not provide, her daughter or a librarian friend would find it and bring it to her. Carers recognized that their elders were successfully acquiring the reading material they needed via other means (e.g. books lent by friends), and whatever bond the elders may have had at one time with the physical aspects of the institution simply were not strong enough to keep them coming.

3. *Informational places.* In this study, "informational place" characterized respondents' descriptions of many library use activities. Purposeful information-seeking behaviour for research, pleasure reading, and/or leisure activities, characterized respondents' descriptions of what they did at the library. Informational use accounted for activities

they undertook for themselves, and to a lesser degree, for their elders; it encompassed the many references to browsing, and use of library computer resources for job searching, online job testing, and video-watching. A number of ways respondents used the library as an informational place were identified:

- for their own personal reasons;
- in their role as mediators on behalf of their elders; and
- in their use of the library's resources to assist them in their caring role. Alternatives to this use of the library were also identified.

Among the varied informational uses respondents made of the library there was a clear need expressed for it to be a place for purposeful research. The main library was perceived as a better source for research than area branch libraries. Although library material could more easily be transferred between branches, the main library was a destination for research:

If I really AM looking for information, like a travel book, for a particular country [...] it's more likely to be at the Main branch, I sort of know that. You'll have better luck finding something there. [R7]

In contrast, branch libraries were not always seen as places that promoted the full range of educational activity envisioned:

I tried to do some homework [at the branch library] once, I was maybe working on an essay or something, but it drove me crazy, it was really, really loud. It was somebody explaining, some staff member explaining [something] to a volunteer [...] [R7].

This interaction suggests a clash of values between patrons and the institution over what the characteristics of an informational place might be in regards to appropriate behaviour.

Several participants in this study functioned as mediators between their elders and the library as an informational place. Examples of this included the respondent who used the online catalogue to place "books on hold" for a visually impaired friend in order to ensure the friend always had books to listen to, and another who, along with her husband, had picked out library CDs for an elderly friend who ran a music appreciation group in her retirement home. Another significant mediating role was organizing the registration required to access the CNIB's library service. Three respondents reported picking up and returning books and other library materials for elders. Using the library extensively in quests for information relating to the parent's tax issues, a veteran's supplement, medication, and genealogical research were commonly reported.

For these carers their public library was almost never a source of information that aided in carrying out any of the additional roles which might be expected in these caring relationships. For example, only one respondent described using the library to find information to deepen her own understanding of an elder's health issues [R3]. These respondents may not have had information needs in relation to these roles, perhaps because for many of them, the physical caring questions were largely dealt with in other ways; instead they used alternate sources (e.g. health centres) to satisfy these information needs.

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With the internet available at home among these carers, search engines eliminated the need to use the library as an informational place. When asked what the parent did when information was needed one carer replied:

Well, it would depend what she wanted. She's learned about the internet from me, so every now and then she'll say, can you Google this? Then she cracks up. Because she doesn't really understand [...] But she knows that if you Google something, it's amazing right then and there, I can answer a question [R2].

For one formerly avid library user, the ease of acquiring e-books diminished the need for library use to find books:

I'm buying books again for the first time in years and years; I'm really not a book buyer, and [I am now] [...] that's because of convenience and instant gratification [chuckle]. I'll read the review and ten minutes later I've got the book on my Kindle [R1].

Some elders continued to look after their own information needs: "She's [elder] got her own world atlas, dictionary, encyclopedia, different things like that" [R7]. Another respondent acquired a computer and used it for reading the newspaper and for conducting personal research "if she remembers" [R4].

*4. Places without walls.* Although an institution's capacity to reach outside its own walls and provide personalized services to patrons wherever they happen to be is an axiom of digital environments, services that "spread in every direction" are not necessarily creatures of the digital age: the department store catalogue, home milk delivery, and doctors' house calls remind us that bringing services to customers where they live is not a new idea. Respondents experienced the library whether they went to it, or it came to them via phone call alerts about due dates, remote access to the catalogue, or book drop-offs to their elders from the homebound service. The virtual, physical and outreach services of the library were one seamless entity: phone messages about due dates, the online catalogue, and the personalized homebound service were experienced as respondents' library without walls. However, their reflections also revealed how a place without walls could sometimes become a place without human support, leading to missed opportunities and negative experiences for themselves and their elders.

Respondents with home computers were aware of, and used the online catalogue. One appreciated the efficiency of the online library on behalf of her elderly, visually impaired friend:

If she wants to read something, she'll call me, and I have her card and [...] because she's not using a computer I have access to her account at the library, and so I will place a hold for a book, and she gets the usual [telephone] notification, and she'll go down to [her branch] and get it [R1].

Another respondent occasionally needed two copies of books, one of which had to be an audio version for her mother, and stated, "I now think of the CNIB as [my] library" [R2]. The library's partnership with the CNIB, which allowed registered users to have access to their library validates Ahlberg's (2010) assessment that in the library of today, "the users move around according to their own needs" (p. 7).

Personalization of online user experience is now a well-established commercial practice which works in two directions. Recommender systems such as Amazon or even public library catalogues are sites where these push-pull practices can be

observed tailoring products to individual interests. Respondents appreciated the library's efforts at personalization of library services:

[...] these days if you have something on hold and it's available, you get the phone call, and uh, this is a good service; [...] You can find out how much you're owing (laughs) if anything's overdue, what's out; and you have the renewal service, which is good! [R5].

The homebound service extended this theme of personalization:

You know, somebody else is picking your twenty-some, or thirty-some books, and, you know, you have your opinions, I like that one, don't bother with that one, but you know you're getting an extra kick out of it somehow, somebody else is selecting them, and you're reacting to this, so [...] it's not random, there's an intelligence working there [R7].

Lack of support for those accessing remote services was reported in several ways. Without helpful family members or other interventions, there was lost opportunity to meet someone's need. In one instance two sets of carers, the granddaughter and the respondent, were unable to mediate this library's selection service effectively on behalf of the elder. Given (2006, p. 383) observes:

[...] these singular experiences can highlight the individual needs of patrons, particularly in settings where policies and practices have been designed for a majority of patrons – with the unintended effect of marginalizing those with specific needs.

5. *Places of institutional power.* Within their “built forms” (Dale and Burrell, 2008, p. 47), organizations embody their particular institutional interests and identities and their related systems of norms, expectations, policies and rules all of which can be characterized as “power-relations” in action (Dale and Burrell, 2008, p. 68). This characterization of the library acknowledges a fifth dimension of library-as-place. As the human embodiment of institutional power, library employees have a significant impact on the quality of the reported library experience realized through application of policies and rules. Respondents described considerable variability in the attitude and flexibility of employees regarding enforcement of rules and assistance with the systems. Further, as carers, respondents were aware that employee interpretation and execution of library practices and rules could have a dramatic impact on the quality of their elders' library experiences. Examples of library rules and systems that were noted by respondents in this study are the application of fines to overdue books, the amount of time allowed to individuals on the public internet access computers, membership requirements, and the classification system. How employees performed their role as holders of institutional power also surfaced as a theme.

The economic sanction of applying fines for overdue books was noted by several respondents: “I've whittled it down now [...] It's less than 20 [dollars] I still owe them”. The “dread” of fines motivated all aspects of how respondents chose to access and use the library.

The library's firm policies around scheduling and allocation of time on these public access computers was perceived less as a service to which any user had a “right” and more as a technocratic system. Membership rules, particularly those around registration and use of cards to enable borrowing materials, were another example of this perceived exercise of power. Many of these respondents benefited from “work-around” solutions to official policies such as being recognized as “the pickup person” in order to facilitate their caring. Even the classification system and shelf arrangements seemed to frustrate and

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create barriers for carers' successful navigation of the library systems and more than one respondent suggested a "seniors section" that would include "things having to do with taxes, retirement fund, pension information, health subjects" arranged more like bookstore browsing than using the traditional classification system. Although libraries have excellent reasons for maintaining cataloguing and classification practices, these educated baby boomer respondents expressed concern about their own lack of knowledge of these practices.

Finally, the behaviour and attitudes of public library employees on behalf of the institution had a significant impact on the quality of the library experience of a number of the respondents as aging individuals themselves, and as carers for elders. Helpful librarians who tracked down particular resources, found call numbers, and provided technical help with printers respondents also demonstrated instances of aggressive expressions of authority: "if I'm not busy I'll help" or when asked for help to retrieve a book from an awkward place, the answer was 'No'" [R1]. Although the latter experience was not indicative of the majority of respondents' experience, such institutional messages performed by an employees also contributed to characterizing the library as a place. As Stokowski (2002, p. 375) notes, "communicative acts" are also evidence of "power relationships in social negotiations over places".

### Discussion

This study offers only the smallest glimpse into the boomer-elder caring relationship in the context of the public library-as-place. Its findings cannot be generalized no matter how much they might resonate with members of the same demographic cohort. Importantly, the perspective of the elders' themselves was not addressed in this study and would complement and almost certainly widen the scope for analysis and understanding of these library-based information relationships.

These findings respond to the research questions as follows. Interaction with the public library took many forms and confirm some of the use behaviours observed in previous studies (Given and Leckie, 2003; McKenzie *et al.*, 2007; Schull, 2010). The ways in which the five use dimensions that emerged from these users enact Schull's previous dimensions are significant both in their similarities and their more subtle differences. Symbolically the public library is democratic, open and inviting, but it is also an agency of institutional power which can constrain individual interaction and engagement with its spaces and services as these respondents described. This organizational trait of public libraries has not been studied in great depth though it is currently being examined in at least one research setting (Griffis, 2011). These political dimensions of the public library's space in their everyday uses by these boomers have been suggested (McKenzie *et al.*, 2007) in previous work but are explicitly described by these respondents.

The idea that the public library can or indeed should do more, more explicitly, to facilitate this very particular caring relationship between baby boomers and their elders is strongly suggested by the voices of these respondents. Just as public libraries serve parents and children in their private, familial relationships, so too should public libraries perhaps consider reviewing their "services to seniors" from the perspective of these caring relationships. The rules and routines in this library setting did not serve this specific boomer-elder caring relationship in parallel ways that parent-child interactions were supported by equivalent policies around lending, access, and sharing

of personal information. The public/private tensions and enactments of relationships in public library spaces and through services such as lending and information access either online or in-person are explored further and complement recent work in this area (Aabo and Audunson, 2012). These respondents recognize and appreciate their private needs of their local public library spaces.

Finally, this exploratory study identified several library use characteristics and behaviours that bear further investigation and which have also been suggested in previous library-as-place studies (Buschman and Leckie, 2006). To begin, these respondents demonstrated an affective connection with the institution. As carers, respondents expressed gratitude when library services supported them by meeting their elders' needs and were saddened or annoyed with the institution when the opposite occurred due to poor customer relations, unreasonably strict adherence to rules, or lack of attentiveness to accessibility issues. Further investigation which explores this emotional connection might illuminate ways that libraries can work more closely with baby boomer carers to support them in their caring roles. Can public libraries as institutional agencies be themselves actors in public and private caring relationships for older adults and if so, what innovations in terms of places, people and services are required?

The ability to use library services without cost is an important criterion for some respondents who depend on the library's public access computers, or who seek out no-longer-subscribed-to magazines related to professional work, a use described by one respondent as "a typical old person's economy" [R6]. Diminished discretionary spending will be a reality for many aging boomers and understanding what the critical caring and enabling elements of this "old person's economy" are from the library's standpoint, will be essential. The library's essential and historically assumed "public-ness" is very much at stake for these users (Rooney-Browne and McMenemy, 2010).

A significant non-use behaviour was identified in this study. Users do not turn to the library to assist them in their role as carers and yet community-based library services seem ideally placed to connect people to information and services. This finding suggests a need for further research to determine to what extent this is a function of this sample, these branches, or this library system. As public libraries increasingly go online to provide their information services and collections, the suitability of these service models and supporting information systems to aging boomers and their older families requires ongoing monitoring and research.

### **Conclusions**

Unless challenged by further research, we risk designing future libraries on the basis that future older adults will join this aging cohort with the necessary knowledge and technology skills to navigate online public library spaces as adroitly and with as much confidence as they have known and navigated their physical library spaces. Future professional, institutional and even government policies and guidelines underwriting library services to "older adults" must begin to differentiate the various age and user profiles within this spectrum, just as library services to young people have become increasingly differentiated and specialized for babies, pre-schoolers, children, and teens. Research into the information and social needs of these sub-groups within the "older adult" spectrum could lead these design changes. In this sense library-as-place and library-as-relationship are one and the same focus of study.

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In sum, Osburn (2007) argues that place and design are significant parts of the role of library administration:

Place is an essential and inspiring sense, but one that sometimes needs to be aroused and sustained through the right kinds of nurturing. It arguably is among the responsibilities of librarianship to work toward that vision (p. 73).

This study offered ways to think about “the right kind of nurturing” that would enhance that sense of the library as a meaningful and caring place for this growing segment of the population.

### Notes

1. The UK Culture, Media and Sport Committee has launched an inquiry into library closures and what constitutes a comprehensive and efficient library service for the twenty-first century. Information is available at: [www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/culture-media-and-sport-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/library-closures/](http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/culture-media-and-sport-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/library-closures/)
2. The CNIB (formerly known as the Canadian National Institute for the Blind) is a registered charitable organization that supports blind or partially sighted Canadians. The CNIB operates a Library which holds Canada’s largest collection of accessible materials for people with print disabilities.

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