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Understanding the information experiences of parents involved in negotiating post-separation parenting arrangements

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Abstract

The paper presents findings from a study into the information experiences of people needing to make post-separation parenting arrangements. Data was collected from 20 participants, through in-depth, semi-structured, telephone interviews. Thematic analysis identified five major themes: Following, Immersion, Interpersonal, History and Context which depict the information experiences of the participants. The findings can be used as an evidence base to inform the design and delivery of support and services provided by government agencies and other community groups supporting the legal information needs of individuals and families. The work extends current understandings of information experience as an object of study in the information science discipline.

Keywords

Information experience, legal context, post-separation parenting arrangements, qualitative research

Introduction

Whilst it has been acknowledged that informed participation in the legal system is integral to a democratic society (Scott, 2000), very little is actually known about the information experiences of people during times of legal need. Consequently, government agencies and other community groups supporting the legal information needs of individuals and families have a limited evidence-base to inform the design and delivery of the support and services they provide. The research presented in this paper builds upon the small but growing body of work that explores people's legal information experiences. There are several studies which may be considered 'specialist', addressing the use of legal information by law students (Jones, 2006; Kerins et al., 2004) and lawyers (Davidson, 2010; Markri, 2008). The present research, however, seeks to investigate the legal information experiences from the consumer perspective, focusing on

the lay public as active users of the legal information they are seeking. For the purposes of this study, ‘consumer’ is understood as per the *Macquarie Dictionary* (4th edn) as ‘someone who uses a commodity or service’. The terms ‘information consumer’ and ‘consumer of information’ have been evident in the literature for more than four decades (Brossard, 2013; Cooke, 2017; Gordon, 1983; Menzel, 1966).

The current research builds upon the small but growing body of evidence in the area of legal information need. Recent studies include Scott (2000) who investigated how people use the Internet to access legal information in their everyday lives, and Edwards and Fontana (2004) who carried out an ‘extensive literature review’ of the legal information needs of older people (p. iv) developing an annotated log from selected articles and reports. The current study is focused on the information experiences of individuals during a specific legal issue. Specifically, it concerns parents involved in negotiating post-separation parenting arrangements. The term ‘separation’ refers to the breakdown of a relationship between two people, heterosexual or same-sex couples, who may be in a marriage or a de facto relationship. Most separating parents will seek some form of parenting agreement, whether formal or informal, in order to establish the way in which their children will be cared for after separation. Typically, parents will need to agree how they will co-parent the children, such as living arrangements, education, contact with relatives and financial support of the children.

Parenting arrangements can be made on order of a court, by negotiation between the parents (with or without lawyers), or through dispute resolution processes such as mediation. However, because of the cost of legal services, many parents are likely to represent themselves in making these arrangements, and rely on such as national telephone help lines in order to obtain the necessary information about their legal rights, the separation and post-separation parenting process and available support. It is within this context that the current study is situated.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the existing relevant literature followed by a discussion of the research method, including how information experience is delineated in the context of the current study. The paper concludes with a detailed description of the research findings.

Literature review

Consumers are often unaware of their need for legal information and have low awareness of the services and sources of information available to them. Edwards and Fontana (2004) conducted review of the literature to examine the legal information needs of older Australians. The literature suggested that older consumers may find it difficult to identify what they need or want to know, about their legal rights. Beyond Australia there have been similar findings. Basu et al. (2009) found that many older people in Northern Ireland were not only unaware of where and when legal advice may be available, but were often not aware that advice was required. They also found there is often a discrepancy between what the information seekers want to know and what they need to know, in order to resolve their legal issue. Westbrook (2008) found that the information needs of individuals seeking legal advice after experiencing intimate partner violence in the US may be determined by external forces (e.g. an abuser’s tactics), and influenced by priorities of support agencies (e.g. a police officer’s focus on pressing charges). She also found that information needs will change dependent on the cycle experienced by the consumer (e.g. understanding their legal rights when reporting abuse). Despite findings that consumers generally have a low awareness of their legal information needs, there is little research examining what prompts them to seek legal advice. Basu et al. (2009) state that very often people do not realise they have a legal problem until they are advised to see a solicitor. However, it is unclear who is providing this advice, or how advanced their legal problem is when they seek help.

Information-seeking behaviour

The literature consistently shows that consumers with a legal information need will first approach friends or family for assistance. Scott (2000) found that people often turn to others as their first preference when they have an information need, which in turn leads them to greater success in finding legal information online. She also states that advice is often what people look for rather than a piece of information, particularly in law. Similarly, Basu et al. (2009) found that older people initially approach family for advice and support when they have a problem, whether legal or otherwise, and respondents in their study expressed a strong preference for face-to-face interaction. Edwards and Fontana (2004) also found that older consumers often encounter legal information through friends or family. Barendrecht (2011) conducted a comparison of three strategies for accessing justice in response to a legal problem, including the use of legal information. He states that when faced with common legal problems, most people will probably know someone who has had a similar problem and they can give a person information directly or refer them to the right sources. More recent studies show that websites can provide a successful platform for consumers to ask others for information. For instance, Augar and Zeleznikow (2014) examined how support and counselling websites assist Australian fathers who have lost daily contact with their children during separation, and found that discussion boards or real time chat facilities can provide accessible, flexible means for people to share experiences, access and give support, gather information and network with people with similar interests or concerns during the Family Dispute Resolution process.

Research also shows consumers will approach relatively few information sources when faced with a legal problem. People will 'use the path of least resistance' when seeking information and the information they obtain is more likely to be used if it is readily accessible (Scott, 2000: 25). Edwards and Fontana (2004) found that older consumers do relatively little information seeking in response to a problem and often only approach one information source, and that when they do come across information, it is often by accident rather than purposefully (e.g. through television, newspapers or family and friends). Basu et al. (2009) state that people generally do not seek out legal information until a legal problem arises and that many older people do not go directly to a legal service provider as there is little knowledge about where to find adequate information and advice. In a study exploring Internet literacy of older people and their ability to resolve legal problems, Denvir et al. (2014: 686) found that consumers in the 60–74 year old age-range were more likely than other users to use the Internet to find 'somebody to sort the problem out' rather than directly seeking 'information to help resolve the problem'. Another study by the same authors shows that despite the widespread assumption that young people possess greater Internet literacy, many users between 18 and 24 years do not always see the Internet as a source of information or advice (Denvir et al., 2011). In contrast to the older age groups studied by Denvir et al. (2011: 103) who expected 'details of appropriate advice services' to be available, the younger respondents studied expected only 'information' from the Internet.

Success in finding appropriate information is largely dependent on previous experience. Yamauchi and Tokosumi (2008) conducted a study of user behaviour when searching for legal information online and found that users with prior exposure to the legal topic would employ more effective search strategies. However, as legal problems are usually one-off, users often do not build up knowledge of relevant legal resources (Scott, 2000). In addition, Basu et al. (2009) found that people are less likely to retain information that does not directly relate to their everyday life and that legal information often does not become significant to consumers until they are required to apply it to a problem. As stated succinctly by Westbrook (2008: 253), 'information needed to address a personal crisis must be presented in direct relationship to that crisis'. This information suggests that consumers may have limited opportunity to develop skills in

searching and using legal information, as the need may only arise once or twice in their lifetime. Research examining how consumers might improve their skills in accessing legal information is limited. Buck et al. (2008) explored whether citizens in the UK have the legal 'know-how' to deal with legal issues and identified public legal education as a potential solution. According to their research, this education would be implemented via public policy and, if conducted successfully, would enable consumers to recognise a legal issue and know how to deal with it.

Online legal information

According to Barendrecht (2011: 6), '[s]tate of the art legal information arrives just in time, is understandable, is tailored to the problem at hand, and is sufficient to cope with'. The Internet is consistently identified in the literature as the easiest and cheapest way to achieve this aim (e.g. Scott, 2000). In a report exploring legal information-seeking behaviour, Peruginelli (2004) observed a recurring theme in the extant literature of the Internet being used to access legal information. This corroborates findings from Basu et al. (2009) which state the Internet is increasingly relied upon as a low-cost method to convey legal information to consumers from legal service providers, government departments, complaint handling bodies and interest groups in the UK context. This is further reflected in studies by Denvir et al. (2011, 2014), who found that there has been a consistent increase in use of the Internet for those seeking advice for problems with a legal dimension between 2001 and 2009, rising from 4.1% in 2001 to 16.6% in 2009.

Despite the usefulness of the Internet, many of studies also identify barriers created by the provision of legal information online. The literature indicates that legal information is difficult to locate for a number of reasons, and consumers can be hesitant to trust legal information found online. Basu et al. (2009) found that Internet access could improve the availability of basic legal information for older people, stating the capacity of the Internet is largely untapped and not enough work is being done to generate awareness. However, they state the usefulness of online information depends on the attitudes of the consumers themselves, the nature of their legal problem and willingness to use technology to access legal information. Respondents in this study stated basic legal information on the Web is useful, but expressed the view that complex or complicated legal issues cannot be addressed and might cause misunderstanding. Denvir et al. (2011: 97) also identify the 'second digital divide', in which a user's lack of willingness to use the Internet can be a barrier to accessing information. Their study showed that younger people reported less success with finding information online compared with other age groups. They showed a tendency to be less persistent in obtaining advice from the Internet, and the authors emphasise the importance of these users remaining engaged long enough to find the information they need.

Peruginelli (2004) states that accessing law resources in an electronic environment presents a number of different issues, such as quality of resources, persistency of links and design interface. Problems also occur with quality-control of information on law-oriented websites, content and accuracy of databases, and user-friendly interfaces. Denvir et al. (2011) identified specific problems young people face when accessing legal information online: they can struggle with selecting categories from web menus, have trouble generating appropriate keywords when searching and rarely consider synonyms or alternative phrases when searches fail. Scott (2000) focuses on a different set of issues, namely that online legal information must be accurate and authoritative. However, she acknowledges that much of the material found on the Internet can be of questionable quality, stating that many legal sites do not provide information about who is responsible for the site or when the material was last updated. Denvir et al. (2011) describe the proliferation of informal legal information websites and state that while there is some benefit in the diversity and potential independence of advice, lack of regulation means that issues of credibility and impartiality remain. They found that issues of this nature

may not be obvious to the inexperienced user. Adding to this complexity, findings by Yamauchi and Tokosumi (2008) show that terms used by legal practitioners and ordinary citizens deviate significantly, creating a barrier for consumers when accessing legal information online.

Some research addresses these limitations of online legal information and identifies potential solutions. Augar and Zeleznikow (2014), for example, discuss the benefits an online forum and chat service can provide in terms of connecting users with others to share information. This approach also satisfies the natural tendency of consumers to approach others for advice. In a discussion of the responsibilities of legal professionals to ensure the 'digital divide' does not disadvantage low income citizens in the US, Gordon (2002) states that legal services can help bridge the content-related aspects of the digital divide by ensuring the information itself is of a high quality and directly relevant to the need of communities. This information might include self-help materials or information on locating the correct agency to help with the problem. Barendrecht (2011) agrees that there are benefits in providing information that clients can use to cope with their legal problems, and that a certain proportion of users presented with the right type of information will be able to solve the problem in a satisfactory way. However, identifying relevant information and presenting it effectively is still a significant challenge for content developers. Denvir et al. (2011) identify the need for more evidence to determine what sort of information users want, what sort of information is helpful, and how the availability and quality of information already accessible online correlates with these demands. They state that further research of this nature is necessary for those designing, delivering and developing advice online. In his discussion of public legal information, Bruce (2000) states that legal information service providers need to do more than simply build distribution systems; he says they must be proactive and help users educate themselves. He states: 'if we act with focus and purpose, we can become not dumping grounds for legal data but accessible storehouses of legal information – that is, data that people, particularly lay professionals, can use and apply.'

To date research into legal information needs and uses of people has examined a diverse range of foci. However, no prior studies to this point have explored information experiences of individuals during a specific legal issue. This study fills that gap.

The research project

Conceptualising information experience

The intent of this study was to investigate the information experiences of people engaged in negotiating post-separation parenting arrangements. Before proceeding further, it is necessary to provide some explanation of how, for this study, the idea of information experience as a research object is being delineated. Information experience may be understood as a 'complex, multi-dimensional engagement with information in real-world contexts' (Bruce et al., 2014: 4).

Information experience 'integrates all information related- actions, thoughts, feelings and has social and cultural dimensions' (Bruce et al., 2014: 34).

Davis (2015) suggests that through information experience research, we attend to: how people experience information, the ways people engage with information, what they experience as information, the nature their experiences with information, and, their thoughts and feelings related to their information experience. Davis (2015) goes on to describe information experience as having three inseparable dimensions: (1) people – individuals and their worldviews,

emotions, backgrounds, thoughts and feelings; (2) information – in its myriad forms and as indicated in the data; (3) context – the space (physical and/or virtual) in which the experience occurs.

Current views of information experience as a research object draw upon and are influenced by phenomenology, which seeks to investigate the unique meanings that comprise people's lived experience of a particular phenomenon. Central to phenomenology is its interest in what is described as the life-world (Husserl, 1970), which refers to 'the world of immediate experience', or 'the existent world as we find ourselves in it' (Adams and van Manen, 2008: 617). In attending to the idea of the life-world, interest is placed on understanding the inter-subjective world of human experience, which comprises people's thoughts and actions, along with the social manifestation of these (Schwandt, 2007). Thus, this study's interest and intent was to examine people's lived experience of negotiating post-separating parenting arrangements as an informational life-world.

Participants

The participants comprised 20 people, 13 males and 7 females, aged between 29 and 51 years. Participant recruitment was targeted and purposive. Participants were drawn from people who had called a national advice line which is a source of telephone advice for families on relationship issues, particularly at the time of post-separation when parenting arrangements were needed. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the participants the name of the advice line will not be disclosed. The advice line is not designed to provide legal advice, but rather offers general information about the family law system, advice on the management of separation processes, support and advice about how to approach post-separation parenting, and referrals to other providers such as telephone dispute resolution, and other social support services. The participants were screened to ensure that all were adults and currently involved in the negotiation of post-separation parenting arrangements. There was no requirement that legal proceedings be anticipated or afoot, which was important to uncover a range of different information experiences. Trained advice-line personnel selected potential participants based on predefined criteria that ensured a client-sensitive selection process was used (e.g. recognising the vulnerable state of people using the advice line services). Potential interviewees were introduced to the research team interviewer by a warm transfer process. As part of the recruitment and interview process, all participants were advised that counselling support was available if required. It was hoped this would maximise the potential for people to continue with the interview. Only two potential participants did not proceed to interview.

Data collection and analysis

Applying a qualitative research method, the project used in-depth interviews to gather data about the information experiences of people engaged in negotiating post-separation parenting arrangements. In-depth interviews are semi-structured and seek to understand the world from the participants' perspective, to reveal the meaning of these experiences (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Kvale (2007: 7) describes interviews as 'a conversation that has structure and a purpose determined by one party – the interviewer'. Through this conversation the interviewer has a 'unique opportunity to uncover rich and complex information' (Cavana et al., 2001: 138), and the participants can express their story using their own words. In-depth interviews were identified as the most appropriate approach for the study because of their suitability in obtaining data about people's views, opinions, ideas and experiences, and where you want to 'ask open-ended questions that elicit depth of information from relatively few people' (Arskey and Knight, 1999; Guion, 2006).

The interviews were all conducted by telephone and audio recorded. While telephone interviewing has been considered inferior to face-to-face interviewing, for qualitative research, a meta-review of the literature found it can encourage sharing of sensitive information as participants 'feel more at ease', and that the 'quality and quantity' of information collected is not adversely affected (Novick, 2008: 396). Interviews were anonymous and participants were offered a small gift voucher as an acknowledgement of their time spent taking part in the interview. Ethical clearance was obtained through the Queensland University of Technology and the national advice line service provider.

A pre-defined set of questions was developed to stimulate discussion and in keeping with in-depth interview guidelines, the questions were altered dynamically to facilitate the conversation. One research team member undertook all interviews to minimise variation of interview process. Most of the interviews were conducted immediately following the warm transfer from the advice-line personnel, with only three being rescheduled to suit the interviewees. Questions were asked to better understand the participant's post-separation parenting situation, what sources of information participants had used to assist in post-separation parenting arrangements, what they found useful or not useful, what they knew about post-separation parenting arrangements before they started looking for information, and what types of information they think might have better assisted them. A second tranche of questions was created for participants who had used a mediation service, asking specifically for their experiences in relation to that process. Follow-up and probing questions were used to explore the participant's responses and experiences; these included: Could you explain that further? Could you tell me more about that? Could you please give me an example?

The recorded data was de-identified (with a pseudonym being assigned to each participant) and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Thematic analysis was used in the study (Braun and Clark, 2006). It is a method for identifying and analysing patterns or themes within the data that are considered to be important to the description of the phenomenon being studied. Cavana et al. (2001) noted that thematic analysis is undertaken to 'identify the underlying themes, insights and relationship within the phenomenon being researched'. The data analysis process undertaken in the current study was an iterative one, constantly grounded in the interview data. The researchers spent time listening to the audio recordings, coding and reviewing the transcripts, with the aim of identifying the emerging themes in the data. Additionally, coding was used to determine the similarities, differences and potential connections among keywords, phrases and concepts within and among each interview. Furthermore, analysis considered the concepts and themes indirectly revealed. Rubin and Rubin (1995: 210) noted that 'you may discover themes by looking at the tension between what people say and the emotion they express'.

Data was analysed using first and second cycle coding methods. In the first cycle, initial codes were assigned as a way to allocate basic labels to the data that would provide a topic inventory. In the second cycle, focused coding was used to categorise the data according to thematic or conceptual similarity, and to eventually develop the most prominent or significant categories from the data (Saldaña, 2013). A codebook was developed and maintained during data analysis, which contained a list of all the codes that had been created, together with their descriptive meaning. As new codes emerged during the process of analysis these were added as necessary, following intensive discussion with the respective research team member.

Findings

The findings reveal five key themes that depict various aspects of participants' information experience in negotiating post-separation parenting arrangements. The five themes are: Following, Immersion, Interpersonal, History and

Context. The following section describes these themes with indicative quotes telling the story of each theme from within the participants' personal information experiences. The participant reference is included after each quote. It is important to note that the themes are not mutually exclusive, as each exists within the participants' information experience. All participant responses indicated that respondents believed they needed 'legal' information.

Following

The theme of Following represents an aspect of the participants' information experience that referred to a journey or pathway where information sources were experienced as being a guide or lead to the next piece of information. Each information encounter guides participants to the next stage of the journey or turn in the pathway.

Participants recalled the first step they had taken to begin searching and the impact of this on initiating the information experience. The responses indicated that participants may choose a known agency or service, carry out general online searches or speak with family, friends or professionals, as the means to beginning the information experience. The collective responses illustrate each of these choices for beginning the information experience as a journey, where the Following theme is evident across the information experience.

Several participants identified agencies or services which they expected would be able to provide information and guidance and would therefore be their first step. The following participant was aware of a likely information source and describes the outcome of the first request for information in terms of the directional or pathway nature which conceptualises the Following theme.

I called Legal Aid and I called a few men's helplines to put me in the right direction ... it's put me on the path of what I need to do next. (David)

Where participants chose to begin looking for information they began using Google. Responses referring to online searches showed that participants were most likely to search for the online presence of a known agency or service such as the Family Law Court or Centrelink. There were a few participants who indicated they had started with a keyword search such as 'family mediation and divorce', 'mediation services' and 'family assistance' to locate potentially helpful information.

The following response illustrates the 'guiding' nature of the Following theme for participants who started by searching for a specific agency or service or type of service on the Internet. Interestingly, Internet-related responses indicated a degree of confusion or difficulty with the information found, but with a means (usually a contact number) of continuing the information experience.

I went on the Family Law Court website ... it came up with a phone number so that's why I called them ... I really couldn't find what I was searching for ... Couldn't find an exact reference to it on the Australian Government website, but it did come up with the Families Australia contact number, so that's why I called them. (Fran)

At some point in the information experience, participants experience information mediated through personal, face to face or phone contact. However, participant responses indicate that contacting a person, professional, friend or family member may be the preferred means for initiating the information experience. Responses indicate that very early in the information experience participants may have 'spoken to' a person (friend, family, agency or service):

I believe first and foremost, I went to my solicitor when this happened and we just had a good old chat ... from there I ...
(Noel)

The Following theme may be present across an entire information experience where participants follow from one piece of information to the next, making decisions and choices which influence the progress of the journey or the direction of the path, over time. The participant responses indicate a number of commonly experienced phenomena which influence how the Following proceeds. They indicate that experiencing information as ‘helpful’ or ‘unhelpful’, was likely to alter the direction of the Following. The next response shows that experiencing information as helpful can directly impact the direction of Following. In this case, the participant experiences information as a pointer to further information seeking:

‘Men After Separation’, I think was the title ... that had all the information that you could need – it was like an encyclopaedia of information, and that pointed me in many directions, in good directions ... (Noel)

It may be significant that responses, such as the following, indicate participants have an innate preference for the way in which information is communicated and this influences the way in which they experience and understand the information. As illustrated by the next response, several participants were able to express a means by which the information presentation or design may have aided their understanding:

I think a sample parenting plan would be easier for me ... if I have a sample ... I could go through how to make it. (Tina)

In conclusion, this final response contains the essence of the Following theme where participants experience information as a journey through resources, decision points and pauses to the next stage:

I just started Googling stuff. And then I did speak to a friend who actually works for Legal Aid, he’s a lawyer for Legal Aid and I gave him a call and asked him for advice ... and then I called the original place [national advice line]. I called that line and then they’ve put me onto the place at XXXX, they gave me their number to make an appointment for a mediation time. (Tom)

Immersion

The theme of Immersion portrays a facet of participants’ information experiences that referred to looking for ‘anything and everything’ with little indication that one piece of information has been experienced as leading to or suggesting the ‘next step’ to locate further information; of feeling ‘overwhelmed’ or of thinking there is ‘too much information’. There is no logical flow apparent in the participants’ Immersion information experience. It is perhaps interesting to note that responses connected to the Immersion theme indicate that participants believe there is a need for a large amount of information. This is coupled in the responses with an associated difficulty relating to the amount of information found and the capacity to decide which information might be useful. The information experience is one of overload as suggested in this response:

I have done so much homework [using Google], I couldn’t decide which one is not useful and which one is useful...I’m currently kind of overwhelmed. I still couldn’t figure out which information is helpful and which information is not.
(Darius)

The next response indicates an easily overlooked load dimension of the Immersion theme, where participants ‘do not use the Internet’ and ‘media devices’ during their information experience. While not directly stated in this response, it

seems likely that given the in-person nature of the information collection, there may have been an inter- personal element to the information experience.

I went and collected brochures from different outlets ... from community centres, to Relationships Australia, Legal Aid centres and such, Women's Scope, Domestic Violence Outreach Services. A lot of people had literature and were able to provide pamphlets I found it better to do it in person for the pamphlets so I could understand ... (Tanya)

In conclusion, the following response is indicative of the Immersion theme and conveys the sense of determined yet unfocused information seeking where it seems the scattergun and repetitive approach may be expected to result in a useful information experience:

... when you're looking for stuff, you're looking for information that relates to your situation ... And there's a lot of information. It's just ... you're just jumping down rabbit holes looking for stuff, and popping out the other side going 'No, that's not what I was looking for.' (Tom)

Interpersonal

The Interpersonal theme depicts an aspect of the information experience which includes either direct face-to-face personal contact or phone conversations. The 'person' may be closely related or previously unknown and is not necessarily a discipline expert or professional.

Participants specifically mention the Interpersonal moment or situation which has facilitated the information search. Responses clearly indicate that personal interaction positively affects the way in which participants experienced, and were able to understand, the information encountered.

Participants expressed a preference for talking to a person when looking for information but had usually undertaken a 'quick look on the website' first. Generally, the responses regarding the preference for Interpersonal contact followed initial difficulty in locating information or in deciding if the information was useful or correct. Participants aimed to improve or progress their information experience through personal interaction. They often said they would prefer to ring someone for information than find it online. The following response reports on more than one information exchange but clearly suggests the effectiveness of the Interpersonal nature of the information experience. The outcome seems to be enabling for the participant. It may be significant that there is no indication that the 'unhelpful' moment has negatively impacted upon the information experience:

I rang Centrelink ... I rang the Family Tax and they updated the care arrangements ... So that's where I found the information about the child support. I rang the Family SA Line today thinking that they could help me but NO, they were dealing with abuse ... I rang the [national advice line] ... they gave me some mediation numbers and their legal guys are going to give me a call. (Stan)

It is worth noting, as indicated by the following response, that Interpersonal exchanges can be supportive within the information experience, quite separately from the actual information found. The participant response below conveys positive value from the 'person' per se. Having 'found a phone number', the information experience then focuses on the actual human communication and the information itself is not considered important:

I just found a phone number and called ... I just knew I needed to call someone and I just wanted to find a phone number to be honest. I didn't really care about the information ... (Ethan)

In addition, participant responses indicate there is better understanding of information when it is delivered by a person than when it is being assimilated online. When the person is from a known or trusted service this also contributes to clearer understanding of the information. The next response indicates the perception of understanding experienced when receiving information from a trusted source. The information experience is one of added benefit:

The lady that I spoke to yesterday [from the Family Centre] ... she was quite thorough with what she was telling me ... I could understand more than what I was reading on the Internet. (Bobby)

Despite the overall positive impact of the Interpersonal dimension on the information experience, it is evident from participant responses that people do realise that the 'person' does not necessarily bring authority or add value to the information experience. The following response indicates participants were making value judgements during an online Interpersonal contact with unknown persons. The information was experienced as untrustworthy, not useful and not authoritative:

I'd have a look at some things [online] but some of it just made no friggin' sense at all, or it's just like a chatroom where people would post this, this, this, this. And I'm like 'Well these are people, there's no way that this can be trustworthy'. (Ethan)

In conclusion, it seems worth noting that despite the generally positive perceptions of Interpersonal exchanges as adding value and understanding to the information experience, participants do not always consider personal interaction as a positive aspect of the information experience. The final response indicates a contradiction within the Interpersonal theme:

I've been asking people and it's just been confusing, you know people are saying different things ... (Bobby)

History

The theme of History describes an aspect of the participants' information experience in terms of current expectations informed by previous similar or related activity. Responses indicate the related activity may have been direct or vicarious. Sometimes, it is the past actions of family, friends and colleagues (as understood by the participants) which influences the participants' current behaviour and expectations. Perhaps not surprisingly, the perceived usefulness of previously used information sources impacts the current information experience. It may limit the current search activity to known resources or may alter expectations of successfully locating helpful information resources. There is a sense that while the previous information experience has conferred a level of understanding, this may not be experienced positively within the current information experience.

The following two responses indicate that having prior knowledge of relevant agencies or services may facilitate the current information experience:

I rang [national advice line]. I guess just having a previous knowledge that they, they work on, on all sorts of relationships ... I thought it would just be a good place to start ... (Darren)

I got the number from Child Support to ring you guys ... they provided me another phone number to ring. I made the contact with the Sunshine Family Assistance ... I'm still enquiring. I'm still doing some research ... I am just trying to find out the right information. (Kerry)

Participants' responses indicated that even when the earlier activity was vicarious, it could facilitate the current information experience for the participants. The following response is indicative of participants who have known family or friends who have been through a similar situation in the past. These experiences have a generally positive effect on the current participants' information experience. As is evident in the next response, it is not only recent vicarious activity that can benefit a current information experience:

Friends who have been through this situation ... you take a great deal of information from them ... and my brother has been through it all as well, many years ago and you know, you take notice of what they have to say. (Kerry)

Interestingly, some participant responses indicated an acute awareness of having no History to inform the current information need. Participants felt devoid of any understanding of what to do or how to proceed with finding the information required. There was a sense of helplessness and incapacity to engage with the current information experience. The following response is indicative of the apparent helplessness or incapacity to initiate the information experience:

I had no idea what the hell was going on ... So I had no idea about that. I had no idea about family tax benefit money or anything like that, percentage of care. I had no idea who to ring. (Stan)

The language ('blind') used in the next response indicates an extreme feeling of being devoid of History, and finding this a barrier to being able to begin the information experience:

No, I was completely blind. I was ... yeah, I was absolutely, completely clueless where to start and what to do. (Vinnie)

It is perhaps noteworthy that the responses suggest that a previous negative information experience may hijack or misdirect the current information experience. Based on a negative History in a related situation, participants may actively avoid using similar strategies or approaches, even when doing so may lead to a more positive current information experience. The final response illustrates this situation. The participant is avoiding a known professional agency and information type based on History even though it may not have led to a negative information experience in the current situation:

... there was also one [pamphlet] for mediation for the Legal Aid setting, but I'd already used that [Legal Aid] in the past and didn't find it helpful ... So I needed a different format ... and a different provider. (Tanya)

Context

The theme of Context describes an element of the information experience typified by explicit participant statements detailing personal circumstances which impact upon their capacity to meet the current information situation. Generally, within this theme, participants' responses highlight negative impacts, with participants detailing their personal situation or Context and the way in which it is limiting their capacity to engage in the current information experience. There are several different types of Context described by participants including socio-economic, health-related, geographical and religious.

The first participant response in this theme is socio- economic. It finds that financial limitations may be experienced as narrowing the information options for participants.

Due to the lack of financial support, the possible avenues for experiencing information have been curtailed. It also highlights the apparent load placed on these participants who then need to personally undertake the information search rather than engage an agency or professional:

[I've been looking] Mainly through the Internet, so I've just been on Google and that's how I found out about the Family Service Centre, which I called a couple of days ago. I haven't spoken to any solicitors as yet, but they require money which I don't have ... So mainly it's been information from friends and also the Internet. (Bobby)

The Context theme includes aspects of health and wellbeing which participants feel hamper or limit their capacity or motivation to engage with the information experience. The following participant response is indicative of those who believe they have health related limitations to the current information experience:

I'm seeing a psychologist at the moment. So she's sort of helping me think a lot clearer. (Bobby)

The third negatively reported aspect of the Context theme is geographical. Participants identifying this element of the Context theme perceive the remoteness of where they live to be imposing limitations on their capacity to experience information. They believe that support agencies, services and professionals not available in their remote locations would be available in more populous areas. The following participant response is indicative of the way in which remoteness can limit the information experience:

... no, no cos I'm in XXXX. It's just a small country town ... so it's hard they [the local solicitor] can't take on a case from two people [the same case and each partner needing information] ... (Kerry)

Interestingly, where positive aspects of Context were evident in the response, they were of a 'community' nature. In these cases, there was a sense that personal involvement in defined communities, positively affected the information experience. The following response highlights the supportive nature of religious 'community', as it provides a place to seek information and people who may contribute to the information experience:

And being a Christian, I thought I'd go to a Catholic one (Care Centre), it's a good idea, so why not. And it went from there. (Noel)

Some participants noted the value of being part of 'the military' community. This provided access to professionals within a known place and space for experiencing the information. The following response indicates that the information experience has been largely undaunting, with an expectation there will be an acceptable outcome:

I'm in the military so we have easy access to legal advisors. I just ring them up they'll give me the appropriate information ... (Ethan)

In conclusion, the final response illustrates the lived reality of multiple dimensions of Context, perceived as limiting the participant. The apparent effect of multiple limitations is one of helplessness. This participant feels there is no way to engage in the information experience due to these limitations and believes there is no way forward:

There's no funding for the things that I need, and I'm not able to utilise Legal Aid or other services. I'm excluded from using their services ... I'm denied legal representation of any kind, so I have to leave it upon myself to make changes, and I don't have the affordability. So, socio-economically, I'm impacted I guess you could say, hugely to be able to benefit the situation even changing. So no! I didn't have the means, the knowledge, the knowhow, the mental capacity at the time to be able to do anything to help myself. (Tanya)

Relationships between the themes

It is worth noting that the themes identified in the current study of the lived information experience do not exist in isolation but interplay to a greater or lesser extent. Following and Immersion can be seen across the information experience, with the Interpersonal, History and Context themes emerging from Following and Immersion. There may be a tendency to understand an 'entire' information experience as either Following, or as an Immersion. However, this study finds they exist together, with both alternating and embedded moments of Following and Immersion across the entirety of the information experience – from the first steps, in this case the intention of the participants to locate information to advise post-separation parenting arrangements, to a recognised 'end' point, the national advice line, which was the recruitment point. The History and Interpersonal themes are intertwined, as friends or family known to have been through similar experiences were recognised as potentially valuable information sources; both successful and unsuccessful encounters with individuals or services impact upon the current information experience. Only two respondents stated positive aspects of the Context theme, with the majority of related responses identifying socio-economic, health-related and geographical contexts that negatively affect the current information experience. These responses align very closely to the History theme. The relationship between the themes suggests the complexity of the information experience and the need for further research to aid understanding and to inform the design and delivery of information.

Discussion

The current research has built upon Australian studies in the legal information area, such as Scott's (2000) investigation into how people use the Internet to access legal information, and Edwards and Fontana's (2004) insights into the legal information needs of older people. By focusing on the information experiences of individuals seeking to make post-separation parenting arrangements, this research has made a positive contribution to the growing body of work that explores the ways in which people use legal information and has contributed to the understanding of the consumer perspective of legal information.

It is perhaps interesting to note that while each participant had begun the information experience with a specific expectation of, and driver for, the initial information search, all the participants in this study had been successful at the point of the interview in contacting the national advice line for further assistance. They had at least accessed information in direct support of their current need. The majority were awaiting an interview to receive further information and guidance. The findings further illustrate the complex and dynamic nature of participants' information experiences, as illustrated by Yates and Partridge (2015), and Davis (2015).

In keeping with results from previous research, this study found that most respondents had sought a family member, friend or colleague for advice or guidance. Scott (2000) noted that when people look to others, they are looking for advice rather than information. It is evident that the advice received by participants in the current study was valued as

information. Where participants began by looking for information online, the enabling was a contact number for a service or agency that the searcher expected would provide more-targeted or more specific information that addressed their personal needs. This study has also shown that participants mostly preferred face-to-face or personal phone contact during the information experience. Cohen-Mansfield (2016) noted the importance of the personal dimension within the information experience, finding that the value of information provided by an advisory telephone hotline could be limited by the lack of face-to-face or personal contact. Several participants valued the personal interaction per se, despite any information gathered. They also valued the personally-mediated information more highly, especially when the provider was known to have experienced a similar information need. This concurs with the findings of Basu et al. (2009) where respondents had a strong preference for face to face exchanges and Barendrecht (2011) who found that most people knew someone who had had a similar need.

Similar to previous research by Yamauchi and Tokosumi (2008), which found that prior experience improved search techniques, this study found that History positively influenced the current information experience for most respondents. Participants with knowledge of, or a previous positive experience with, a service or agency were motivated to contact those same agencies and did so with the expectation of a successful outcome. However, and not apparent in the earlier research, a previous negative experience with a service, agency or legal process, could mislead or unnecessarily halt the current information experience negatively impacting the current information experience, as participants did not wish to repeat past unsuccessful interactions.

While not extensive across the current study, there were several responses which resonate with the literature on information design and delivery. Several responses suggested that participants would have preferred the information to be presented in specific formats such as 'sample parenting plans', 'a register for people in separation situations ... so they can get updates as to what their rights are [and anything they should follow up or review]' and 'a multiple choice sort of thing where you can go click, click, click and then it'll give you the information that relates to your situation'; or simply felt there was 'no prescribed format to follow' (Tom, Tina, Carl). These responses allude to the History theme from the perspective of previously experienced information formats. Participants were apparently familiar with the recommended formats and this aspect of the information experience may warrant further research.

In contrast, the findings presented below contradict several findings from the earlier literature review. They highlight the complexity of the information experience and remind those who aspire to provide equitable access to relevant and authoritative legal information, that there is no single strategy that is likely to be positively experienced by, or useful to, all information seekers. Unlike Augar and Zeleznikow (2014), who found, as stated earlier, that chatrooms and discussion boards could be valued resources for single fathers in post-separation situations, the present study found that chat rooms do not necessarily provide a useful space for sharing information as they may be considered untrustworthy, 'like a chatroom where people would post this, this, this, this...there's no way that can be trustworthy' (Ethan). It suggests that further research may be needed to explore the information experience of chatroom participants and identify strategies they use to evaluate trustworthiness. Contrary to the findings by Scott (2000) that people generally engaged with few information sources when faced with a legal problem, responses in the current study suggest that participants engaged with many information resources. Participants reported 'digging and digging and digging to get the information', 'I've taken everything on board', 'I've read everything I've been given' (Steve, Noel, Tom), suggesting they had engaged quite extensively and experienced a large amount of information. The current study begins to explore the potential relationships among the themes and suggests further research into the complexity of the lived information experience

Conclusion

The current research investigated the information experience of participants needing information to help them manage post-separation parenting arrangements. This paper has presented the findings from this information experience research study. The study used a qualitative, thematic analysis method and identified five major themes that illustrate the information experience perspectives of these participants as they sought information to make the parenting arrangements: Following, Immersion, Interpersonal, History and Context. Each theme has been described with indicative responses which convey a sense of the information experience for the reader. Findings from the current study have supported previous research relevant to information-seeking behaviour and online legal information. Several contradictions to previous research have been presented. The findings suggest that further research is needed into the information experience of people with a 'crisis-related' information need, such as family breakdown. In addition, this study contributes to, and extends, our understanding of information experience as an object of study within the information science discipline. It has been suggested that information experience research will provide a 'broader understanding and interpretation of people's engagement and interaction with their information environment' (Bruce and Partridge, 2011: 1), and that a focus on experience offers a more holistic approach to understanding people's engagement with information than a behavioural approach may afford. The findings of this study provide support for this by highlighting the significant complexity that people experienced as information and how they experienced that information when negotiating post-separation parenting arrangements.

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