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Reading Among Older People: A Concise Overview

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Reading continues to be one of the key ways in which older people spend their time (along with watching television or visiting with friends and family) and yet the role that reading plays in the lives of older adults remains an understudied topic across academic disciplines. Reading behaviours and reading as a social practice have received growing scholarly attention though the number of reading studies of younger adults and young people outnumber those focused on older adults. Despite this trend, the reading practices of older adults have been of interest in Library and Information Science (LIS) studies for several decades given LIS researchers and librarians' desire to better understand how best to provide services and materials to members of this diverse and growing demographic. While in recent years there have been a few studies of older people's reading habits outside of North America, the preponderance of available reading research is focussed on North American contexts, particularly as seen by the American and Canadian Library Association's definitions of older adults that hold sway in the LIS community. The effects of differing reading abilities or demonstrated literacy levels on cognitive status are studied in public health research contexts as has the impact of reading on older adult's feelings of isolation or community embeddedness as well as the role of reading in older adults' perception of their own wellbeing. Given their growing numbers, the publishing sector positions older adults as a viable market worldwide for published materials such as electronic, large print and audio books; older people represent an avid audience for specific genres of literature such as romance, mystery, biography and autobiography, travel and history. Newspaper and magazines have always been favoured leisure reading materials for older adults as well. Advances in digital technologies are increasingly noted as potent and driving changes in how older people engage with reading materials including their use of reading tablets and other mobile devices. While reading devices, genres and source will vary, as may the motivation and outcome, reading remains an integral activity for many older adults.

Who Are Older Readers?

Studies that sample from general populations of people older than 55 years of age consistently find that women read more books and read more frequently than men, although men tend to read more news than women. In American studies, older readers belonging to visible minority groups are reportedly less likely to be readers into old age, as are individuals who were not readers in their younger years. Some studies have shown that urban older adults seem to read more than their rural counterparts. Scant research has focused on socioeconomic variables, however, in keeping with findings from general reading surveys, there is some evidence that older people of lower socioeconomic status and with lower levels of education read fewer materials and read less frequently.

However, many older people read daily or almost daily. In fact, older people are more likely to have read a book for pleasure in the past twelve months than people in any other age category. For those older adults aging in a developed country, active and leisure reading practices appear to be encouraged and fostered by a variety of government, community and familial institutions, with the amount of time devoted to leisure reading increasing with chronological age.

Reading Habits of Older People

Older adults are reported as being selective readers, choosing reading materials purposefully. The elderly are noted to use 'strategies of economy' when making reading choices, with the intent to save time and effort. Newspaper and magazine reading are more common reading materials for older adults aged 65 and over whereas reading various documents for work is, not surprisingly, more characteristic of younger adults. Most reading done by older adults consists of newspapers, magazines and books. Newspapers are valued for being rich sources of local community news, events and other useful information. Although older people spend much more time watching television, this is reported to be one of the least favourite ways to pass the time; books are overwhelmingly noted as their media of choice.

Older adults privilege public libraries along with friends or family members as sources of leisure reading recommendations and materials, although book reviews and the title's literary merit also remain as influential criteria for making reading material selections. In 2013, a Pew Research Center study, "Library Services in the Digital Age," reported that ninety-three percent of people over 65 years of age valued libraries as important to their communities, while seventy-five percent saw them as personally important. Older people are heavy users of public libraries and many borrow several books a month from the library. As digital reading technologies continue to develop, influencing access to reading materials and how they are read, public libraries will play a critical role in educating and training older people in how to borrow and read books using electronic and mobile reading devices. Current research on the e-reading practices among older people yields inconclusive findings regarding the adoption and use of tablets and e-books and magazines. Communication and media research suggests that older adults are keenly interested in social media, emerging digital technologies and mobile computing applications related to media consumption, a trend that is projected to grow as baby boomers, often touted as highly educated and computer literate, transition into older age, undoubtedly impacting this growing population's reading practices and habits.

Differences in literary genre preferences between older women and men have been reported in a number of studies. Both older men and women are found to enjoy books on history, travel, finance, art and fiction (particularly mysteries and crime, historical fiction and classics). With increases in age, older adults are noted to be increasingly inclined to read history, war, genealogy, heritage and biography/autobiography genres. Women include cookbooks, humour and current events to this list whereas men are more likely to include science and technology genres to their preferred reading repertoire. Neither older adult men nor women have been traditionally reported as enjoying health and medical topics, science fiction, fantasy or horror, though these trends may be shifting to correspond with baby boomers entering older adulthood, evidence of the need of further, contemporary research regarding the reading habits and

preferences of older adults. In addition, re-reading and revisiting favourite books and authors is cited as a preferred reading activity of many older readers.

Benefits of Reading

Contrary to the belief that reading may contribute to or perpetuate feelings of loneliness, reading can assist older adults in maintaining contact with society and their local community. Indeed, those older adults who read are reported to be more likely to participate in social events. Supporting the notion of reading as a social practice, reading also functions among older people as a way for them to connect with other people in their lives; reading provides an avenue for conversation, exploring and conversing with others about shared interests and reading experiences. A shared love of reading is cited as a powerful expression of friendship and love among all readers, including older people. Structured shared reading events are increasingly being studied for the capacity to which they improve the relationship dynamics and quality of life experiences of both older people and their caregivers. Reading is seen to counter feelings of boredom that are assumed to plague the elderly, allowing time for relaxation and the opportunity to converse and communicate with others, promoting an overall positive engagement with life.

Reading has also been promoted as an activity that reaps other benefits including the ability to better cope with stress perhaps as it gives an impression of maintaining mental activity and because it may aid older adults to come to better understand or accept their own aging process. The process of reading provides the elderly with differing coping strategies for dealing with a myriad of challenges, enhancing their quality of life. For example, much like other readers, older adults also report that reading is a way to learn about themselves and others, to explore and research topics about which they are curious, and simply as a pleasurable way to pass the time. However, reading for pleasure should not be discounted merely as a commonplace, everyday life practice without meaning for those who do it. Leisure reading may constitute a unique yet vital way for older individuals to develop, enact and share a special expertise related to reading genres and literature.

Future Developments

In recognition of this growing demographic, as research regarding older adults' reading habits and needs evolve and gradually increase in frequency, studies continue to explore older adults' barriers to reading. Obstacles to reading are often more likely to be related to socially constructed problems relating to assumptions about aging that present challenges to older people. For example, a prevailing belief is that barriers to older adults' participation in reading activities stem from cognitive or physical ailments and disabilities, but this belief is not borne out by research, representing an area of continued study and development. Reading programs and initiatives for the elderly constructed on a deficit-based model of aging focus on reading as a functional task (i.e., as a way to improve memory, recall or comprehension) fail to not only recognize the pleasures of reading that are vital for many older adult readers but such an approach also strips away the diversity inherent within the older adults population.

As both scholars and practitioners within the LIS community begin to explore this population in depth, more recently published research reveal two trends, in particular,

that appear to be contributing to a fuller construction of the reading practices of this particular segment of the population. Continued advancements and innovations in technology as well as studies of older adults in geographic regions outside of North America will both contribute to a shifting, yet richer understanding of the reading needs and preferences of older adults including a more holistic understanding of the role reading plays in older adults' daily lives and the role reading plays in supporting and supplementing their wellbeing.

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See Also: Creativity, Large Print Books, Learning, Leisure and Consumption, Library Services for Older Adults, Recorded Books

Further Readings

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