"A GARDEN IN THE POCKET"

The Value of Reading for Older Adults Living in the Community

A study submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Librarianship.

at

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by

TIFFANY THOMAS

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CHINESE PROVERB

"A Book is like a Garden that can be Carried in the Pocket"[1]

1. (Elkin & Lonsdale, 1996, p11)

ABSTRACT

Much research has been conducted with regard to reading amongst, specifically, children, and also adults.   Far less is known about this activity in the lives of older adults.   This gap in knowledge, coupled with a wider 'bypassing' of this group by society, provides the impetus for the current study.   The principal aim is to investigate the value of reading for older adults living in the community.

The research process is qualitative in nature and combines the research methods of focus group interview, individual interview and literature review.   A purposive sample is used to recruit the focus groups, in order to gain the perceptions of a wide range of older adults representing different social classes and ethnic groups.   A small number of individual interviews are also conducted to include the frail and dependent elderly.

The data is analysed and various themes emerge which are taken to the literature and compared and contrasted.   The research topic is explored within the theoretical framework of the reader-response approach to literature, the 'uses and gratifications' model from mass communication theory, and bibliotherapy, from the discipline of psychology.

The research finds that older adults benefit from reading in four main areas.   Firstly, readers read to escape.   This is manifest in a variety of forms including diversion from current realities and escaping into memories through reminiscence. Secondly, participants also develop knowledge through reading in terms of practical information for day-to-day living and the advancement of literacy skills.   The maintenance of cognitive function is a further benefit.   Thirdly, reading has

therapeutic value for many in terms of encouraging relaxation and sleep, and also for easing a troubled mind.   Finally, in the everyday lives of participants, reading plays an integral and enriching role.   Reading helps pass the time, is a unique source of entertainment and connects participants with the public library, providing wider benefits.

The research is reviewed critically in the summary chapter, and the potential for future inquiry along with any implications for librarianship - in terms of the practice and training - are discussed.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank:

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Chapter one: INTRODUCTION

OLDER ADULTS AND READING

When setting the scene of a work centred on older adults, it was considered
important to begin from a simple, but often overlooked, premise.   Namely, that
older adults are a diverse group comprising a wide range of individuals. For fear of
stating the obvious, they are like adults in their heterogeneity and differences, they
have simply aged.   Indeed, when asked to describe how it felt to be old, J.B. Priestly
responded:

> "It is as though walking down Shaftesbury Avenue as a fairly young man, I was
>
> suddenly kidnapped, rushed into a theatre and made to don the grey hair, the
>
> wrinkles and the other attributes of age, then wheeled on stage.   Behind the
>
> appearance of age, I am the same person, with the same thoughts as when I was
>
> younger".
>
> (in Bytheway et al., 1990, p148).

The diversity amongst elderly people is none more apparent than with regard to
reading interests, which are notably catholic (Anderson, Luster and Woolridge,
1992; Edmonds, 1991; O'Rourke and Ngandu, 1980; Harvey and Dutton, 1979)
and certainly not befitting the stereotyped picture of 'light' novels and family sagas.

Reading is a significant leisure activity in later life and is amongst the few that
provide enjoyment and interest far into old age (Smith, 1993; Edmonds, 1991).
Indeed a recent national survey investigating the reading habits of British people
found those over sixty-five to be the most avid readers, spending an average of eight

and a half hours per week reading (Book Marketing Ltd./The Reading Partnership, 2000).   However whilst we know a little of the reading habits of the British elderly in terms of statistical data, the impact this activity has on the lives of this group is clearly lacking in the literature, providing an opening for the present study.

A GAP IN KNOWLEDGE

Adults and the Experience of Reading

The University of Sheffield

A body of qualitative knowledge is beginning to assemble regarding the value of the reading experience for adults and this has provided a useful foundation for this work.   Over recent years, work completed by the Department of Information Studies at the University of Sheffield has been relevant to the subject area.   This includes two Masters dissertations: Taylor (1999) employed focus groups to investigate the benefits of reading for primarily young adults, and Hamshere (1990) considered this issue in the context of library borrowers.   In addition, Toyne and Usherwood (2001) developed themes from within these previous works through their inquiry regarding the views of people who read imaginative literature from public libraries.   However none of these studies were age specific.

The Wider Literature

The literature incorporates studies that are relevant to the present research.   In particular, from the discipline of psychology, Nell's (1988a, 1988b) often quite scientific investigations provide some interesting insights into the different types of adult reader.   Radway's work in the nineteen-eighties evaluated the experience of reading from the perspectives of women, and Mann (1982) completed similar work.

Additional studies investigating adult readers include Ross (1999), who interviewed numerous committed readers about the place reading had in their lives. Correspondingly O'Rourke (1993), developing the findings of the Comedia report, researched the reading attitudes of library users in one local authority.

Older Adults and the Experience of Reading

Research concerning reading typically concentrates on children and young to middle aged adults. In contrast, very little attention is paid to older adults (Smith, 1993; O'Rourke and Ngandu, 1980). A number of studies have examined the reading habits and interests of the elderly (Scales, 1996; Anderson, Luster & Woolridge, 1992; Speak 1990; Scales and Biggs, 1987; Hunt, 1978) however less research has been directed towards understanding the kinds of benefits reading provides for this age group. Where this issue has been broached (O'Rourke and Ngandu, 1980; Check and Toellner, 1984; Rane-Szostak and Herth, 1995) it was as part of a wider study and was always quantitative in nature, therefore an indepth understanding of what reading actually means to this age group was not provided. However one study by Wolf (1977) comprises a qualitative inquiry, incorporating group interviews with the elderly, to investigate the value of reading. Although this was conducted in the context of residential care, and is quite dated now, this does serve as a useful comparison for similar qualitative work in this area, such as the present study.

THE ELDERLY - A NEGLECTED GROUP

The dearth of research regarding elderly people and the experience of reading becomes more pertinent when considering the wider context of the general 'overlooking' of this group by society as a whole.   One elderly resident of a nursing home, simply known as Kate, describes her feelings of redundancy:

> Dark days are upon me ,
>
> my husband is dead,
>
> I look to the future,
>
> I shudder with dread,
>
> for my young are all busy,
>
> rearing young of their own,
>
> and I think of the years and the love I have known.
>
> But inside this old carcass,
>
> a young girl still dwells,
>
> and now and again,
>
> my battered heart swells.
>
> (In Elder, 1977)

Indeed, retired people in Britain today are required to 'step back' from society and lay to rest the positions and responsibilities they once held, leaving many to feel worthless with a lack of purpose and usefulness (Bytheway et al., 1990; Bond, Coleman and Peace, 1993).   Society further reaffirms its lack of priority for this group by discriminating against them through the economic and social policies which benefit the young and employed (Walker and Naegele, 1999).

AIMS OF   RESEARCH

Principal Aim: A Focus on the Elderly and reading

Because the elderly are indeed an overlooked group, it was a personal preference to choose them as the focus for the current study.   The subject of reading was also a personal interest.   The existing knowledge regarding these subject areas displayed an obvious gap, as outlined above, and therefore provided an opening for further research.   Therefore the principle aim of the present dissertation was to qualitatively investigate the experience of reading for elderly individuals living in the community, in order to determine the benefits, if any, obtained.

Objective: Evidence of Impact

Public services to the elderly, such as the library, are extremely important, enabling a sense of integration and involvement in society.   However regarding library provision for this age group, the British picture suggests room for improvement. National surveys have found services wanting in a number of areas including financial investment (Street, 1994; Edmonds, 1991).   In order for the public library to secure the resources required to ensure a greater impact, it must be able to gather evidence which demonstrates to potential investors that its services are of value to senior citizens.   As a secondary objective therefore, it was hoped that by investigating the benefits that reading has in the lives of elderly individuals, the current study would demonstrate one aspect of this value .

Secondary Objective: The Public Library and Older Adults

Closely linked to the experience of reading for older adults are the services of the public library - the place where a significant number of this age group access their reading materials.   Indeed people over sixty-five are frequent library users and are

the highest borrower group amongst adults (Edmonds, 1991; Book Marketing Ltd/The Reading Partnership).   Therefore it was decided to include in the current study a brief examination of the role of the public library in the lives of elderly people and to consider the function it serves for them.

An aside

For definitions of terms such as reading and older adults, please refer to the section entitled *Parameters of Study* in chapter two.

VALUE OF SUCH STUDIES NOW

"Without some understanding of the people we serve, libraries become no more

than statistical information warehouses".   (Mellon, 1990, p3).

Libraries have been gathering statistics for years in order to justify their worth (Hernon and Altman, 1998).   In the past, libraries have concentrated on the systems and services they offer to evaluate their effectiveness - employing scientific, quantitative methods.   Typically this would involve recording the input of resources into the service, for example the number of books added to stock by each member of staff.   This would be compared with the output activities of libraries, sometimes known as workload indicators.   For example the number of inquiries answered or the quantity of inter-library loans obtained (Broady-Preston and Preston, 1999).

However examining physical standards and systems and counting 'how much' and 'how many' in this way, tells us little of the impact these services are having on the lives of individuals or on the communities they serve. Indeed, Linley and Usherwood (1998, p6) warn that "it is all too easy to count the obvious and fail to see what is significant".

Fortunately, over recent years research has increased regarding the less quantifiable functions of the public library. A report by Matarasso (1998b) *Beyond Book Issues* called for an 'urgent need' to revise the narrow library performance indicators such as book issues, and consider the wider value of libraries to communities - to the things people look to libraries to provide for them. His research investigated eighteen library projects to illustrate the impact of libraries on a wide range of personal and social issues. At about the same time, Linley and Usherwood (1998) conducted a social audit of two library authorities. They aimed to identify the social and economic impact of the public library to the individuals and groups who were affected by, or could affect, the organisation. In like manner, Toyne and Usherwood (2001), as outlined above, also incorporated the social audit methodology to investigate the impact of the public library in providing a reading experience.

It is important to consider how libraries are advantaging people for a number of reasons. Reductions in the library budget, coupled with the extended accountability of recent years, has increasingly led to demands for evidence of quality in areas that are not readily quantified - for example user satisfaction (Hernon and Altman, 1998; Davies and Kirkpatrick, 1995). Indeed, as Toyne and Usherwood (2001) affirm, studies which focus on benefits and impact are becoming recognised as an effective way of demonstrating the value of a service to those who may invest in it. They continue to explain how this can also provide a useful insight for management, assisting them in the design of better systems and services. However, primarily,

research of this kind is important to librarianship because it tells us more about the needs the public library fulfils in the lives of people, and after all librarianship, according to Line (1996, p77), is ultimately about "managing information resources for *people*" [my italics].

STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

The following methodology chapter considers the theoretical framework within which the research topic is explored, which incorporates reader-response criticism, the 'uses and gratification' model of mass communication theory and bibliotherapy. The chapter describes how in developing the methodology, the combined research methods of literature review, focus groups and individual interviews were employed to determine the benefit of reading for older adults.

Following the methodology chapter, the emerging themes from the research each comprise a separate chapter - chapters three to six. Each chapter includes a descriptive and interpretive discussion of the data, which are compared and contrasted to the conclusions of the literature. Therefore the literature review does not appear as a separate chapter, instead it was decided that this would be placed more appropriately where it would be used. It was also felt that this format would ensure the work reads as an integrated whole, and is an approach supported by reputable authors in qualitative research (Meloy, 1994; Mellon 1990).

The final chapter seven, 'Summary and Conclusions', draws together the principal findings from the study. The research process is reviewed critically and strengths and weaknesses identified. The questions raised by the dissertation are presented along with any implications for future practice. Finally, the potential the current research provides for future inquiry is discussed.

Chapter two: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework underpinning the research.   Also a description of the process followed in order to investigate the current inquiry - incorporating details of the research methods employed - is presented.   However, the chapter begins by describing the broader qualitative context in which the study is seated.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Overall, this study aimed to determine the *experience* of reading for older adults - to gain an understanding of the outlook and perspective of the individuals involved. Qualitative research is the ideal approach for gathering insights of this kind because this method of inquiry seeks to understand "what people believe, how they feel and how they interpret events" (Gorman and Clayton, 1997, p25).   Indeed it aims to understand the "full complexity of the individual's experience" (Baily, in Rudestam and Newton, 2001, p92).

Qualitative research is exploratory and inductive in nature, therefore often this method avoids approaching research with a pre-determined hypothesis or assumption.   Qualitative inquiry can involve the process whereby a theory is gradually built, from a series of small-scale research activities, as categories and reoccurring themes begin to emerge (Mellon, 1990; Gorman and Clayton, 1997). This particular practice is sometimes known as 'grounded theory' - data are built 'from the ground up' (Gorman and Clayton, 1997).   This dissertation was exploratory in nature and therefore lent itself very well to qualitative study.   Indeed, as far as possible, the topic - the value of reading for older adults - was approached openly, without any pre-conceived ideas.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Regarding the theoretical framework within which the problem was to be explored, three methodological approaches were identified - reader-response criticism, 'uses and gratifications' theory and bibliotherapy.

READER-RESPONSE THEORY

Traditionally, literary criticism supported the belief that meaning in the reading experience would be found completely and exclusively in the text.   This was the philosophy of the school of 'New Criticism', who considered the reader as a passive participant in the reading process, "dying, so to speak, in order that the text might live" (Tompkins, 1980, pxiv).   However, through making the text the central focus, literary criticism failed to address the important issues of why individuals read and what relevance the reading experience has in their lives (Freund, 1987).

In the nineteen-thirties, a new school of thought began to develop.   One of the leading theorists connected with this was Louise Rosenblatt, who introduced the notion of transaction between the reader and the text.   Specifically, she proposed that the text and reader affect each other - both were responsible for producing meaning.   Reader-response criticism, as this way of thinking became known, considered the reader an active party in the reading experience, drawing on past life experience and current circumstances, to construct meaning from the content of the text (Clifford, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1970; Ross, 1999, Appleyard, 1990).
Rosenblatt's opinion was shared with another prominent theorist in the field, Wolfgang Iser, who likened the text to a set of clues, whereby the reader became a co-creator in the work, supplying the part of the story which is not written but only implied (Clifford, 1990; Tompkins, 1980).

'USES AND GRATIFICATIONS' MODEL

At about the same time that reading theory recognised the active role of the individual reader, a body of research was beginning to develop concerning the wider context of mass media usage, and the active role of the audience in this. Prior to this point, in parallel to reader-response criticism, audiences had been viewed as passive and impressionable. The prevailing view at that time was that of the social psychological scholars, who focused on the effects the media had on people - how it formed or changed their attitudes, for example (Berger, 1995).

However in the nineteen-forties, theorists from the discipline of functionalist sociology began to consider a contrasting perspective. This developed through observations of certain radio programmes, which revealed that a particular content would result in great appeal. From this, a different kind of inquiry began, which concentrated less on what the media do to people and instead considered what people do with the media (Marris and Thornham, 1997). Advocates of this new way of thinking decided that in fact the audience were active players in the entertainment they sought, they used the media in order to satisfy certain needs and desires. This reasoning was deemed the 'uses and gratifications approach' (McQuail, 2000; Marris and Thornham, 1996).

Over the following years considerable research was conducted which showed that audience members described their media experience in functional terms, and a recurrent pattern emerged as to what uses people had for the media, for example diversion and social contact (McQuail 2000, McQuail, 1997).

Although this model is not specifically concerned with reading, it does provide a useful insight into uses people have for the entertainment they engage in, and the satisfactions they derive from this, which is relevant to the present study.

BIBLIOTHERAPY

From as early as Aristotle's times, when the sign above the Greek library at Thebes read 'the Healing Place of the Soul', literature has been recognised for its therapeutic value (Forrest, 1998: Lanza, 1996). From this premise, the discipline of bibliotherapy developed, which is defined by Clarke and Bostle (1988) as the part the book plays in enhancing and sustaining mental health.

According to Hynes (1986), two approaches to bibliotherapy exist. One school of thought asserts that the therapeutic process occurs through the act of reading itself, involving a personal interaction between the reader and the text, without any external input. This reasoning is termed 'reading therapy' and is the methodological framework most applicable to this study. Out of reading therapy developed self-help bibliotherapy (Cohen, 1994). Based on the concepts of cognitive learning and behaviourism, this involves the use of a book of programmed instruction to guide the individual, without input from a therapist.

'Interactive bibliotherapy', in contrast, involves guidance through the reading material by a trained facilitator. This has links with the oldest school of thought regarding bibliotherapy, developed by Shrodes in 1950. Working from a psychoanalytical framework, Shrodes proposed that a body of imaginative literature could be used to diagnose and treat emotional problems (Cohen, 1994).

Bibliotherapy has been shown to be helpful in the lives of older adults in terms of adjustment to daily life and life review (Hynes, 1986) - matters which are referred to in greater detail in Chapter Five. Indeed an adjunct of bibliotherapy is reminiscence therapy, which enables older people to look back on past achievements and experiences through books and other materials (Dee and Bowen, 1986).

Regarding bibliotherapy in relation to libraries, over the past decade, the service has begun to collaborate with reading therapists to find very satisfactory outcomes (Forrest, 1998).   Indeed research for the present study involved a useful contact with a scheme operating in Kirklees, where bibliotherapists cooperate with local libraries and doctors surgeries in order to "promote well-being, relaxation and friendship through books and reading" (Kirklees Metropolitan Council, 2001).

RESEARCH METHODS

The research process for the present study combined the research methods of a literature review, focus groups and individual interviews.   This is an example of triangulation as it involves gathering data from a number of sources in order to confirm findings and to illuminate a theme (Rudestam and Newton, 2001).

LITERATURE   REVIEW

On commencing the dissertation, an extensive literature review was completed and this was updated regularly throughout.   From the literature review, of related previous research and literature, themes were identified and the findings of the dissertation were compared and contrasted with these.
A number of sources were consulted for this purpose which included:

Databases
Databases representing a number of disciplines including education, library and information science, psychology and social science were thoroughly searched.   The systems consulted included BIDS, to access the education databases of ERIC and the British Education Index; WebSPIRS to access the psychology database, psycINFO

and the library and information science collection, LISA.   Also the International
Bibliography of Social Sciences, IBSS, was searched.   In addition, cited reference
searches were completed for key articles and authors, using the Web of Science
system, and electronic journals were accessed via ingentaJournals.

Books

Numerous texts were consulted which provided foundational information for this
project.   They were located through the university catalogue, the public library
resources or the inter-library loan facilities.   Key texts included:

Reader-Response Theory

Rosenblatt, R. (1970). *Literature as Exploration* London: Heinemann.

Tompkins, J.P. (ed.) (1980). *Reader-Response Criticism.* London: The John
                              Hopkins University Press.

Psychology of Reading and Bibliotherapy

Nell, V. (1980). *Lost in a Book.* London: Yale University Press.

Hynes, A.M. (1986). *Bibliotherapy- the Interactive Process.* Boulder: Westview.

'Uses and Gratifications' Theory:

McQuail, D. (1997). *Mass Communication Theory.* London: Sage.

Berger, A.A. (1995). *Essentials of Mass Communication Theory.* London: Sage.

Research Process:

Krueger, R.A. (1994). *Focus Groups.* London: Sage.

Morgan, D.L. (1997). *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research.* London: Sage.

Mellon, C.A. (1990). *Naturalistic Inquiry for Library Science.* London:

Greenwood Press.

Gerontology:

Bond, J., Coleman, P., & Peace, S. (1993). *Ageing in Society.* London: Sage.

Dissertations and Departmental Research

As mentioned, previously completed dissertations and departmental reports proved very useful in formulating ideas for the dissertation and identifying gaps in research.

The Internet

The internet proved very useful regarding up to date information such as biliotherapy, where the latest development in practice could be monitored.   Useful web sites include:

Leopold Web Pages - Poetry and Reading Therapy:

Available:http://users.erols.com/leopold/poetry.htm [Last accessed 1 August 2001].

Arts in Therapy:

Available: http://www.artsintherapy.com/   [Last accessed 25 July 2001]

Earthlink Web site - for useful links regarding bibliotherapy:

Available: http://home.earthlink.net/   [Last accessed 25 July 2001]

ERIC summary sheet - for introduction to bibliotherapy:

Available: http://www.indiana.edu/~eric_rec/ieo/digests/d82.html

[Last Accessed 1 August 2001]

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups were chosen as the primary research tool for this study.   Focus groups are defined as a "carefully planned group discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest" (Krueger, 1994, p6).   They incorporate distinct features, for example the central role of the moderator who oversees the activity; and also they are conducted as a series, comprising multiple groups with similar participants, in order to identify themes and similarities between the discussions (Krueger, 1994).

The Preference of Focus Groups for this Study

Focus groups provide a number of advantages.   Group interviews of this kind are an excellent means of inspiring and stimulating ideas between participants; individuals are prompted to contribute as they relate to, or are challenged by, the thoughts of others in ways that may not occur in individual interviews or questionnaires (Greenbaum, 1998; Mellon, 1990; Krueger, 1994).   In the light of this, focus groups also enable direct comparison of people's experience and opinions (Morgan, 1997).   Regarding the present study, the interactive nature of focus groups was considered ideally suited to the topic of reading.   Reading is a relatively 'low-risk' subject and is something most people have experience of, and therefore lends itself well to group discussion.   In addition, focus groups are preferable to individual interviews, when the topic permits, because they are a more natural means of

obtaining information. Specifically, focus groups are socially oriented, and we are largely social beings, and can therefore prove a more relaxed and often enjoyable activity (Marsall and Rossman, 1999; Gorman and Clayton, 1997).

Limitations of Focus Groups

There are also disadvantages to the interactive element of focus groups. Members of groups sometimes feel intimidated and are less able to convey their true feelings or opinions (Brown, 1988). Two possibilities can result. Firstly, there can be a tendency towards conformity, whereby participants feel less able to express the views they would share in private (Brown, 1988; Morgan, 1997). In contrast, individuals may articulate more extreme opinions than they actually believe, and polarisation results (Morgan, 1997). In order to limit this situation occurring as much as possible in this study, as Krueger (1994) advises, full introductions accompanied each group meeting, emphasising the importance of all contributions and explaining that the prime objective of the discussion was to gain a full spectrum of opinions, however much they differed from one another, and therefore providing assurance that there could be no right or wrong responses.

A further weakness of group interaction is that there is always the potential for a dominant character to evolve who will monopolise the conversation and inhibit others from sharing their convictions (Greenbaum, 1998; Patton, 1990; Gorman and Clayton, 1997). The literature suggests that moderator diplomacy should be employed to resolve this situation (Greenbaum, 1998). However, moderator involvement must be used carefully to guard against the uneasy position whereby the researcher unintentionally directs the conversation towards a particular bias (Greenbaum, 1998; Morgan, 1997). In addition, the validity of the focus group can be further impinged by the moderator's presence because of the natural tendency of people to want to please and provide the 'correct' responses (Greenbaum, 1998; Gorman and Clayton, 1997). Therefore this research was approached with careful

consideration of these pitfalls in the hope of minimising their effect - objectivity was attempted to be maintained at all times. However as Morgan (1997) rightly points out, moderator influence is a weakness of nearly all qualitative research and only the most unobtrusive methods can fully avoid this.

Participants

Parameters of Study

It was decided that for the purpose of the current study, the term 'older adults' would incorporate those sixty and above. Although, increasingly, some senior citizens regard this period of their lives beginning at early retirement age, for example as young as fifty-five (Street, 1993), it was decided to maintain the definition as sixty plus, in order to ensure a clear distinction from middle-age. Participants were also required to be community dwellers, because this was a group least explored in the literature regarding the topic area.

The term 'reading' in the present research, incorporates the reading of fiction and non-fiction books (including poetry, biographies, play scripts, comic books, self-help manuals and religious works). It also includes reading substitutes such as spoken-word cassettes.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was used in this study. Purposive samples are composed of individuals from the population who possess characteristics that are appropriate for the research project (Morgan, 1998; Gorman and Clayton, 1997). They are recommended for focus group recruitment (Morgan, 1998). Because a particular criteria is applied in this method of selection, the purposive technique is more systematic than its counterparts of convenience and opportunity sampling

(Morgan, 1998) - which simply recruit anyone from the population who is available at the time (Bell, 1992). It was decided that the random sampling technique, closely associated with quantitative research, was not appropriate. This is primarily because this study aimed to understand the in-depth experiences and perceptions of a small number of individuals, rather than to gather numbers and statistics that can be generalised to represent the wider population (Mellon, 1990). Also, it was intended that groups would be formed that interacted well together and generated lively discussions. This is something that is encouraged through the purposive criteria of bringing similar people together, which a random sample may not achieve (Morgan, 1997).

Criteria for Group Composition

Some experts recommend composing groups of homogenous individuals - similar in gender, age race and background - in order to ensure compatibility and therefore the highest quality discussion (Greenbaum, 1998). However Morgan (1997) believes that this is not a fixed rule for all research projects - certain topics do not necessitate a homogenous group. Regarding the present study, homogeneity was secured to an extent because of the stipulation that participants must be of a similar age, yet it was felt that the research topic did not necessitate that groups be composed of individuals of the same gender. However it was considered important to form groups with similar social and educational backgrounds as far as possible because the topic of reading may have proved difficult for some participants if they were vastly dissimilar to others in these categories.

The literature also advises that focus groups should be composed of strangers to avoid the situation of over familiarity, which can result in individuals only providing the briefest of explanation because their view point is already known to their acquaintances (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1998). Whilst it is recognised that this is a valid point, this criterion was not employed in the selection of interviewees for this

study.   This was partly because the limited time and resources available for this project resulted in the decision to seek volunteers from already established groups; and indeed as Morgan (1997) remarks, seeking interviewees with specific characteristics, as in this study, can prove time consuming.   However it could also be argued that strangers may have felt intimidated by one another and not shared as freely as a group of friends.

The current study aimed to draw from the experiences and opinions of a wide range of older adults across society.   Therefore groups representing different social classes and ethnic backgrounds were approached.   Gorman and Clayton (1997) describe how gaining perspectives from a variety of people in different settings in this way can be considered a form of triangulation also.   The groups used in this study are described at the end of the chapter.

Size of Groups

Focus groups should be composed of approximately four to ten individuals. Smaller groups are thought to be more beneficial in that participants have more time to share their feelings and therefore greater depth is achieved (Greenbaum, 1998). However, larger groups can sometimes generate a livelier discussion, although can be more difficult to control (Morgan, 1997).   It was decided that an ideal size group for this study would be approximately six - large enough to ensure good interaction, but also a manageable size.

Recruitment

Group leaders were contacted approximately one month before interviews were planned to commence, in order to allow for plenty of notice and also to clear official channels.   Contact was initially made by telephone, to establish the degree of interest and to provide opportunity for questions.   If the leaders were favourable, a formal letter was then sent, providing clear details of the purpose of the research and

what the interviews would entail - including information about the time required and notification of the recording equipment to be used.   It was suggested to group leaders that the group should be approached and consent obtained at this stage. Approximately two weeks after the letters were received, the group leaders were contacted again and dates confirmed.

INDIVIDUAL   INTERVIEWS

A small number of individual interviews were also conducted after the focus groups, as a secondary source of information.   This was to gain the additional perspective of those older adults who were very frail or unwell and obviously unable to participate in a group session.   To provide this contrasting perspective, four very elderly individuals were visited who used the Sheffield housebound library services. Interviewees comprised two men and two women, whose reading abilities ranged from use of standard materials, to large print and spoken-word cassettes.   Fuller descriptions are found at the end of the chapter.   The individual interview schedule was the same as that employed in the group discussions, and was analysed using the same process - so as to be easily comparable to the focus group findings and incorporated into the main body of the report.   Details of interview structure and analysis for both research tools are found below.

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Degree of structure

A complete copy of the interview schedule is contained in appendix A.   It was decided that the interview would take a semi-structured format, so that questions were composed in advance and presented in a particular order (Berg, 1995; Bell, 1992; Gorman and Clayton, 1998).   This approach enables the discussion to remain focused on the relevant issues (Morgan, 1998) and also simplifies analysis as comparisons can be easily made across the groups (Bell, 1992; Morgan, 1998). This more formal style was also preferred due to the inexperience of the researcher. However the interview framework allows for a degree of flexibility providing participants with the freedom to respond in their own time and bring their own emphasis to the discussion.

Question Order

The questions were ordered carefully so as to build a relationship with the interviewee (Bell, 1992) and ease the flow of the discussion.   The format recommended by many authors (Berg, 1995; Greenbaum, 1998; Krueger, 1994) was adopted for this study.   This commences with 'warm up' questions, used to establish rapport, where respondents are asked to discuss general, simple and non-threatening questions relating to the topic.   Following this, key questions, that aim to retrieve core information to the study are asked.   Here the focus is to gain a depth of response, and therefore questions are directed at drawing personal experience and perspectives and are also more specific (Morgan, 1997).   The interview ends with a summary, by the interviewer, of the main points raised, and then respondents are given the opportunity to state their most important reason for reading.   This final question enables each respondent to have one final say.   It is

also included to aid analysis, as those factors participants believe to be of greatest value to them are clearly identified, and therefore the false assumption - that those topics which are mentioned more frequently are the most important - is avoided (Krueger, 1994).

Question Wording and Composition

It is recognised that the wording of questions is very important in order to maintain objectivity and avoid unnecessary barriers. Questions were phrased carefully to ensure they were non-directive, and therefore did not imply that a certain response was required. Also it was considered important to make the questions simple and composed in plain English, therefore avoiding ambiguity.

After the third focus group, the question ordering and composition were altered slightly in response to their performance, which is a practice recommended by Krueger (1994, p141) who states that questions should be "finely-tuned en route" and that unproductive questions should be discontinued. Specifically the question "What time of day do you like to read, and for what reasons?", was responded to far more enthusiastically as the initial question than "Tell me about the books you like to read?", and so these were swapped round. Also the question "Has a book ever altered your attitudes or beliefs?" was answered far more confidently when it was phrased, "Has a book ever made you think in a different way?", and so this was amended.

KEEPING A RECORD

Following each interview, a check list was completed by all the group members or individual interviewees, in order to obtain background information about participants, for example to determine the range of social class present. A copy of this can be seen in appendix B. The interviews were recorded on cassette in order to enable the moderator to listen fully during the sessions, and also to provide a record of events that could not be captured as well by note taking, for example the tone of voice of a respondent. Following this, the tapes were fully transcribed. 'Field notes' were also made immediately after each meeting in order to record important observations such as body language.

ANALYSIS

Analysis involved a method of examining the data gathered and the literature, and identifying the recurring ideas and commonalities which emerged. Gradually these were sorted into categories or themes. This was a continuous process so that when new data was obtained, it was compared with data that has already been grouped to determine the extent to which it fitted. This method required continual modification and flexibility until all the data was placed in the most appropriate category. This is an approach based upon Glaser and Strauss's (1967) "constant comparative method" (in Rudestam and Newton, 2001; Lindlof and Thomas, 1995). Each of the themes are discussed in the following results chapters under the headings:

- Reading to escape
- Reading for knowledge
- Reading as therapy
- Reading as a part of everyday life

As explained in the introduction, each chapter will comprise a presentation of the findings, which will then be taken to the existing knowledge and compared and contrasted. A discussion of what has been found will also be incorporated here.

DESCRIPTIONS OF GROUPS AND INTERVIEWEES

In total, forty-four people participated in this study. In the following descriptions of the focus groups, any statistical information provided - regarding ethnic population size, or degree of deprivation, in the areas in which the groups were located - was acquired from data collected by the Sheffield Health Department of Information and Research (1998) or the Sheffield First Partnership (1999).

FOCUS GROUPS

Group One

This group was located through a national society, 'The University of the Third Age', which has an educational emphasis, and organises a variety of activities for the retired. Composed of six women and one man, the group members were largely in their sixties, married, were well read and able to speak very articulately and intelligently. One Spanish and one German lady attended the session, which was held at the home of one of the members. This was located in the least deprived electoral ward in Sheffield and all group members lived within the area.

Group Two

Interviewees came from a coffee morning activity which meets twice a week at the library, although is run as an independent event. The group contained six members, all of which were women. The participants' ages ranged between sixty and eighty-four. Mostly the ladies had received a basic school education, with the exception of

one, who had obtained a degree.   The group had largely lived in the area all their lives, which is a pleasant district of Sheffield with below average levels of deprivation.   Five of the participants were married, one was divorced.

Group Three

This luncheon club met in one of the more affluent areas of the city, however most members had travelled from a number of districts, which varied in their level of prosperity, and therefore the group did not comprise of individuals from any one particular part of Sheffield.   The group included six members, all female.   The distinct characteristic of this assembly however was that participants were generally older than in other groups, mostly in their eighties and one who was ninety-four. Also, all members were widowed and lived alone.   Respondents all had a basic education and had left school young - the oldest at sixteen, and two members as young as twelve.

Group Four

The distinguishing feature of this group was its ethnic composition - the five participants were all born in Jamaica.   They were all female and lived in two of the more disadvantaged areas of Sheffield, which have a high proportion of ethnic minorities.   Generally, group members were very basically educated and some required assistance to complete the check list (although all spoke of their ability to read).   The session was held at the Afro-Caribbean community's meeting hall, where the ladies were part of a larger social gathering.   The ladies were mostly in the sixty-five to sixty-nine age bracket and were composed of both married and divorced members.

Group Five

Comprising one man and four ladies, this group met in the library of a deprived area of Sheffield, where a high number of households receive income support and social facilities are few and far between. Participants had working-class backgrounds and were employed in non-professional positions after receiving a basic education - largely leaving school between fourteen and sixteen. Ages ranged between sixty-five and ninety-four. Two of the group were married, two widowed and one single.

Group Six

An interesting group composition, consisting of an equal division between ladies of Afro-Caribbean and British backgrounds. The group were seven in number and met at a local church luncheon club in the area where they lived. This is the Sheffield ward with the greatest number of black and ethnic minority residents and two acute areas of poverty, as defined by Sheffield City Council. Again the age differences were wide - ranging from sixty-five to ninety-four. Participants included a cross-spectrum of marital status including single, divorced, widowed and married people.

Group Seven

This reading group met at their local library located in the most deprived ward in Sheffield, which has the highest rate of unemployment and the greatest number of residents over seventy-five. Of working-class background, the group members mostly left school aged fifteen years. Participants totalled four, the smallest number so far, and were comprised of one man and three women. Two of the members were married, and two were widowed.

INDIVIDUAL   INTERVIEWEES

Please note, all names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

Interview One: Mr Smith

Aged ninety-one, this gentleman was of professional background and extremely knowledgeable and articulate.   Spending most of his day reading, this interviewee enjoyed a broad range of literature.   Residing in a pleasant area of Sheffield, Mr Smith was very recently bereaved, within the past two months, and found particular solace in books.

Interview Two: Mrs Cotton

Mrs Cotton was of working class background, where she had left school at fourteen to commence employment in an unskilled occupation in a factory.   This lady was eighty-four years old and enjoyed large print books due to her failing eyesight.   She was a widow who lived alone.

Interview Three: Mrs Green

This lady, at ninety-four, was partially blind and therefore gained her reading experience through spoken-word cassettes.   As an avid reader all her life, Mrs Prince spoke of the centrality of this activity to her life.   She was a particularly articulate and well spoken lady and had not completed any further education.   This lady was also widowed and lived alone in a particularly affluent area of Sheffield.

Interview Four: Mr Jones

Mr Jones was a gentleman who enjoyed reading adventure novels.   At ninety-six years old he was remarkably agile and was the oldest participant in the study.   This gentleman lived in a pleasant, middle class area of the city in sheltered

accommodation.   He was a recent widower who lived on his own.   He had left school at seventeen and worked as a manual labourer for the council.

LESSONS LEARNT

On reflection, the topic of reading worked well in the focus groups conducted for the present study.   Lively discussions were generated by the subject and participants appeared to enjoy sharing their experiences and opinions together.   Fortunately the potential for conformity amongst group members was not a prevalent occurrence. Admittedly in the first group, whilst individuals were willing to put forward contrary opinions, the last question, "What is your most important reason for reading?", did seem to generate a round robin response whereby participants fell in line with one another.   However, it could be observed in subsequent groups that this could be avoided by supplementing the last question with an assurance that responses did not necessarily have to be the same.   In the main, however, participants were willing to voice their opinion even if this was not widely shared.

The actual supervision of the focus groups was a learning exercise, which improved as the sessions went along and more experience was gained.   Primarily this concerned developing skills to elicit fuller responses.   For example, in the initial sessions, statements such as "I read for pleasure" were left relatively unexplored. However as the interviews continued, 'neutral' probes, which produced richer replies, were employed.   For example in response to the statement "I read for pleasure", the simple prompt "what is it exactly that brings you pleasure?" was used.

A further group management issue concerned interruptions.   Often an individual would begin to make what appeared to be an interesting point, however their flow would be broken by an eager participant who wished to share.   Keeping a mental note, and returning to the original speaker at an appropriate time, proved an effective way of recovering a conversation.   However often the enthusiasm with which the initial point had been embarked upon was diminished, and responses became brief or not at all.   Although the utmost attempts were made to avoid situations of this kind, for example by employing appropriate eye contact and body language, sometimes interruptions did remain a frustration during the discussions - yet this would probably be a scenario which would decrease with greater moderator experience.

Regarding the individual interviews, undoubtedly the greatest limitation here concerned the presence of a library member of staff throughout the sessions. Obviously this increased the potential for interview bias and the perceived pressure on interviewees to make the 'appropriate' responses.   However, this situation was largely unavoidable if one was to prevent the unacceptable scenario of a stranger entering the homes of vulnerable people, alone.   If time had permitted, it would have been preferable to visit the participants on a number of the regular housebound calls, in order to establish trust and build a relationship, and then to make an unaccompanied visit at a later date.   However, considering the constraints of a three month study, this was not possible.

Although the collective stimulation of ideas, which had been so successful in the group discussions, was lacking in the individual interviews, a strength particular to the latter was the willingness of participants to be open and vulnerable.   Individual interviewees were prepared to share the personal circumstances of their lives, such as loneliness and aloneness, which was not so forthcoming in the group discussions. This may partly be explained by the fact that older adults may not be willing to

admit the extent of their loneliness to one another because of the stigma attached to this (Tinker, 1997).   However regarding the present study, the discrepancy could also have arisen because circumstances for the housebound clients - for example the fact that they were indeed housebound, generally older and all living alone - may have resulted in them actually feeling the effects of loneliness more then their independent counterparts.   It is impossible to be certain.

INTRODUCTION TO RESULTS

Prior to commencing the results chapters, it was considered useful to provide a few explanations regarding presentation.

General Presentation

Participants comments are presented in italics, and a summary of their details in terms of gender (F=female, M=male), age and group number - in that order- are written in brackets underneath, for example:

"Quote by participant"
(F/64/5)

Recording Of Age

When participants were requested to record their age on the check list (see appendix B), the options were divided into categories. Where age is specified in the following chapters, the highest figure for the age range is cited. For example:

60-64 = 64

65-69 = 69 etc.

Those over ninety-five are simply recorded as 95+.

Group Discussions and Confidentiality

Sometimes it was more appropriate to present a conversation between group members, rather than an individual quote. Where this occurs, a different letter is used for each individual involved in the dialogue, in order to distinguish between participants and also to preserve confidentiality. Where names are included in quotations, a pseudonym is provided.

Chapter three: READING TO ESCAPE

A high proportion of readers across the groups and also individual interviewees, spoke of the way reading enabled them to leave their current reality and to 'escape' for a time:

"Of course you get submerged in a novel as you do in the theatre.   I mean you go to the theatre to suspend belief.   And that's what the theatre gives, you absorb in yourself - it's the same with books ".
M/94/HB

"Ay, like escapism really.   You get yourself in a good yarn - you can just lose yourself".
M/74/5

"Well it's partly that you're absorbing into a fantasy world, isn't it?   And I forget about everything else and you're just part of the story".
F/64/6

"When you're reading you form your own ideas about the person that you're reading about, and you have your own little family in your mind, and you read and you're just gone - you're with them!".
F/74/2

"Because as Jessy said, you're in it [the book]*, you're inside there - you're travelling with it".*
F/74/7

"It sets the brain going.   It's like an inner world once you start on a book.   It is an inner world and you can see and imagine this thing and you think about it".
F/64/1

A small number of readers become so absorbed in a book they completely lost touch with the world around them, and even created their own reality:

"Well I can't think of anything else that I lose myself in.   I like cooking and I can spend an afternoon doing nothing but cooking, but all the time my mind is absorbing what is going on around me.   But yet when I'm reading a book, I don't think I even notice".
F/64/7

" House can fall down and it doesn't matter does it?.   You know what I mean. That's the art of a good book is that the house could fall down about you, anything could happen, and you wouldn't even notice it".
M/64/7

"And when I read I 'colour' the reading.   For instance I mentioned the author writing about the Lake District.   Well in one book he mentions the strong man riding across the bluebells on his white horse - well.... I can see him.   I can see him with his white horse coming over the blue bells.   I colour it all".
F/94/3

Bennett (1995) describes this as an extreme form of escapism which involves completely forgetting one's surroundings and becoming completely emerged in the narrative - "Switching off one world and switching on another", as Nell (1988b) writes.

Glass (quoted by Nell, 1988a, p39) relates the experience of escapism through reading to dreaming: "This is....the experience of the reader who sinks through clamorous pages into soundless dreams". Similarly, Gerrig (1993) uses the metaphor of being *transported* to narrative worlds to describe the phenomena, whereby the reader participates in the construction of an illusory place. Indeed leading writers of reader-response criticism describe how involvement of this kind is most effective when the author purposefully leaves 'gaps' in the text, thereby provoking the reader to participate in the story and use their imagination to complete the missing narrative (Iser, 1980). Rosenblatt (1970) supports this when she states that any literacy work gains its significance from the way the minds and the emotions of the readers are evoked to respond to the text.

One of the principal 'Uses and gratifications' studies was completed by Blumer and Katz in 1974 and researched the goals of television watching for viewers in Leeds. Although this did not focus on reading in particular, it still provides a useful insight into people's motivations for seeking out entertainment, of which reading can be included. The research found diversion, in the form of the temporary occupation of a fantasy world, to be one of the prime media-person interactions (Marris and Thornham, 1996; Dutten, 1997; McQuail, 2000).

Time and time again escapism has been found to be one of the principal incentives for reading amongst adults (Toyne and Usherwood 2001; Taylor 1999; O'Rourke, 1993; Hamshere 1990; Radway 1983). In fact in Taylor's research, which employed a number of focus groups to investigate the experience of reading, the initial remarks in every interview made reference to this phenomenon.

Older adults also engage in reading in order to escape. A recent national survey found that a high proportion of senior citizens read to 'escape' and 'use the imagination' (Book Marketing Limited/The Reading Partnership, 2000). Also, a

study by Duncan and Goggin investigating reading habits and interests of older active readers, reported that it was the escaping from this world aspect of reading which enabled older adults to sustain an interest in it (in Aiex, 1987).

READING TO DULL CONSCIOUSNESS

Most participants who read to escape reported preferring books that portrayed a world that was far removed from their own - one that was non-threatening and pleasant.   They did not wish to be confronted with texts which reflected their own reality.   This preference was repeatedly communicated through descriptions of Catherine Cookson's writing which was disliked because of the *"down-trodden"* (F/64/7) life styles she often portrayed.   Respondents found this to be *"a little bit too much"* (F/84/6), *"depressing", "morbid"* and reading that *"doesn't lift you up at all"* (F/84/3).   Indeed, a dialogue between the ladies in Group Two went as follows:

A - (69/2) *"I like historical, me.   I like to go back to the Victorian era, I've read quite a few.   It's an era I'd love to have lived in actually.   Yes, well not the poor families but the wealthy families.*   [Speaking passionately] *Oh the dresses they wore, the dances they went to..."*

B - (74/2) *"The jewellery... "*

A - (69/2) *"Everything they wore, it was marvellous.   You go to Catherine Cookson and..."*

B - (74/2) *"It's rags and everything...."*

A - (69/2) *"It's the poor part.   It depresses me that.   I like to be uplifted.....Oh yes, I like to imagine myself in ball gowns".*

C - (64/2) *"well we've lived the other times you see.   We want something different".*

However, perhaps the greatest aversion to being confronted with reality through reading could be found in the Afro-Caribbean group, who all strongly objected to historical novels:

A - (64/4) *"I don't really read them, I mean some of them put you off with what they done to people.   You don't want to look at it".*

B - (69/4) *"Sometime really people want to know their history but sometime you're better off not knowing it".*

C - (64/4) *"Because it hurts, you thinks it's going to happen to you".*

It was curious that none of the participants in Group One made any reference to reading to shut out unpleasant realities.   Group One was composed of individuals from the most affluent area of Sheffield.   Although financial security does not provide protection from all life's adversities, it may shield from some of the problems less fortunate older adults are confronted with.   For example loneliness - a subject which is considered more fully in chapter six - ensures that many senior citizens wish to shut out the circumstances of their lives for a time.   Although it is not being suggested that the affluent elderly are immune to loneliness, this

experience is especially prevalent in the working classes for whom lack of finance often limits the extent to which they are able to visit social clubs and societies (Tinker, 1997; Fennell et al., 1993; Bytheway et al., 1990).

Returning to the Afro-Caribbean participants, who expressed a keen desire to avoid literature relating to history, again this may be an example of a group using their reading experience as a means of avoiding painful realities in their own lives. Indeed for those members of the Afro-Caribbean community who are elderly today - as chapter five broaches in greater detail - recalling their history and memories of life in Britain may well be an upsetting event.

Regarding older adults generally, gerontological research would suggest this group may be in particular need of escaping to a world more pleasant than their own.   For example, according to psychological theory and aging - and in particular Erikson's life cycle - the goal of later life is to reach a conclusion of integrity, whereby an individual can look back on their lives and accept the course it took.   However, for some this can not be achieved and a sense of regret and failure causes them to feel despair (Biggs, 1993; Bond, Briggs and Coleman, 1993).

From the psychology of reading literature, Nell (1988a, 1988b) describes the phenomenon of reading to shut out current realities, in order to escape from self-consciousness into a fantasy existence very different to one's own, as reading to dull the conscience.   He summarises this beautifully when he says:

> "Reading's airy bamboo and paper house is a marvellously safe place, a protection
> from many kinds of earthquake: this fragile dwelling allows readers to enjoy a kind
> of sovereignty over their lives and over their worlds" (1988b, p226).

The author Margaret Drabble recalls how she valued reading to dull the conscience as a teenager when living with her mother's severe depression: "She read to escape from herself, and I too read to escape her" (In Salwak, 1999, p104).   Nell makes the analogy between reading and eating when considering this type of reader, describing how they prefer to gobble down the text whole, and as fast as possible, in order to achieve maximum effect.   Similarly Manguel (1996) relates reading to the metaphor of a bodily function whereby the reader *devours* the book.

Toyne and Usherwood (2001) describe how participants read to distract themselves from their everyday existence, and Taylor's (1999) readers used books to withdraw from unpleasant situations.   However, one of the principal studies which demonstrated the use of reading by adults to escape from self-consciousness was conducted by Janice Radway and involved the readership of romantic fiction. Radway's work comprised extensive interviews with a group of female compulsive romance readers in the early nineteen-eighties.   She concluded that the women overwhelmingly cited escapism as their goal.   Indeed, due to life's pressures, they wished to "deplete a sense of self and use romance to construct a fantasy world" (Radway, 1993, p62).   In a similar fashion, Mann (1982), in his study of Mills and Boons readers, commented that women read to distract the from the chores and pressures of real life.   Correspondingly, O'Rourke (1993) found that it was not so much due to a lack of realism but precisely because they *did* know different, that women appreciated reading romance.

REMINISCENCE

One aspect of escaping from current realities for older adults is the practice of reminiscence:

"I travelled around the world and now of course I don't do it any longer. Now when I listen to these cassettes [spoken-word cassettes] *there's always something crops up where I've been and it's interesting to me...So it means a great deal to me...it takes your thoughts right away from you as you are now, to other better times. I think your memories are very important when you're older. You live on your memories and it brings the happy times back again which is lovely".*
F/94/HB

"About some of the books, there's things in it. Things that I had to do and what my mother had to do and you forget them times and it just brings it all back to you, you see. I mean some things crop up when I read it and I think oh, I'd forgotten all about that ".
F/84/HB

"[reading] *takes you back. It takes you back to the good old days. You're still remembering those times".*
F/69/4

"You can't remember things now like you used to do, so you read books to fetch memories back again...They bring to mind memories that have faded".
F/89/3

"Yes I like to read about the older part of Sheffield and what they used to do.   I had a job in the steel works and I like to come to the library and get the books about how they did the making of the steel".
F/79/2

Readers found that literature acted as a trigger to evoke images from the past. However, comments of this kind were mostly made by the older and frailer participants in the present study.   This may be explained by the function of reminiscence which becomes especially pertinent to elderly people at the end of their lives.   Reminiscence is not simply a means of recalling memories, a sort of warm nostalgia, instead it serves an important purpose.   Often for senior citizens, whose main roles in life are becoming increasingly redundant, there is a need to maintain a strong sense of identity.   Reminiscing through books can enable older adults to maintain self esteem and adjust to life (Romami, 1973).

Returning to the concept of life review and Erikson, reminiscence also enables some older individuals to reflect on their past and therefore provides them with an opportunity for them to come to terms with the way they have led their lives (Appleyard, 1990).   Certainly, reminiscing through reading groups has been shown to bring pleasure to elderly residents of nursing homes (Wilson, 1979; Harvey and Dutton, 1979).

READING TO HEIGHTEN CONSCIOUSNESS

A smaller, but significant, number of participants however did not want to use their reading to escape into a different world which was nothing like their own.   One gentleman explained:

"[I read] *anything that's connected with living.   You see I'm an atheist anyway, so I don't really care for any of the after life business.   I like to be connected with what's happening when you're living".*
M/94/HB

For some therefore, the objective when choosing a novel was not to encounter a highly imaginative and unrealistic text but instead to be presented with fiction that they deemed believable and realistic, with characters they could relate to and connect with.   One lady, describing a book about gangsters that she'd recently read, stated:

"But they're gangsters you can identify with, you know the local thug gone a bit wrong, that type of thing".

And later she continued:

"If you read a book and you go all the way through it and you know for a fact nobody does live like that, you're wasting your time".
F/64/7

One gentleman, when describing why he does not like Dick Francis, stated rather cynically:

"He always knows somebody he can borrow a hundred pounds off.   He'll jump in a taxi that'll take him to the other side of town and it's 'oh, just wait while I see my mate and borrow some money!'   He's always got access to that, which in real life doesn't happen".
M/64/7

The above participants, who sought self-recognition in their reading, were from working-class backgrounds.   A need to identify with others facing similar circumstances to their own, perhaps in order to find solace, may be a reason for this. This finding has strong correlations with a survey of Cleveland library users conducted by O'Rourke (1993).   She found that many people enjoyed reading books in which they recognised themselves, and that far more people than expected had wanted something believable or true to life from the narrative.   O'Rourke continues that the pleasure of self-identification in a book is especially true for working class readers who hope to strengthen a sense of belonging.

According to research within the psychology of reading, when a reader endeavours to become involved with the characters and circumstances of a book in order to gain insight and develop personally, this is a form of escapism which is termed 'reading to heighten consciousness' (Nell, 1988b).   Individuals who are willing to do this will experience the most effective form of escapism because they are savouring their reading experience and fully concentrating on engaging their imaginations. However Appleyard (1990, p178) acknowledges that for many, interacting with the text to this extent, which may involve confronting and drawing from personal realities and experiences to bring meaning, "takes more courage than many of us would want to invest in reading".

However a significant number of participants in the present study were brave enough to absorb themselves in a book not to reduce their self awareness, but to use the story and characters as a tool for self-exploration.

"Books can really help you to see different people's points of view better.... And make you examine what you think yourself and be a bit more open to change your views".
F/69/1

"Yes yes they [books] *change your mind very often.   It starts you thinking a good train of thought which is good".*
F/94/HB

"Sometimes your attitudes change.   I mean it's like this book we are reading about Africa.   It's about the white people and you end up feeling sorry for them.   You can see their problems.   It's not just about people going to conquer, but they were stuck there, marooned there.   So it changes your ideas".
F/69/1

One gentleman stated:

"I relate my own experience to what's in the book itself and what I learn from other people's experience in the book.   Character in individuals means a great deal to me".
M/94/HB

Therefore, for these individuals, reading brought understanding and insights for their own lives and situations and enabled them to reconsider their opinions and attitudes.

The use of mass media to heighten personal awareness and understanding was first acknowledged in the nineteen-forties when women were found to engage with radio soap operas in order to gain insight for their own lives (McQuail, 2000). This was the start of the theory that people are not merely passive recipients of the entertainment they engage in, but use this to meet specific goals. Indeed it is now widely accepted that the public use the media as a form of personal reference, in order to highlight some feature of their own situation or circumstance (McQuail, 2000; Dutten, 1997; McQuail, 1997).

Correspondingly, the conviction of reader-response theory that the reader is an active participant in the reading experience is illustrated by the way personal situations and memories are brought to the text when reading to heighten consciousness. Indeed as Ross (1993, p785) asserts, "the reader plays a crucial role in enlarging the meaning of the text by reading it within the context of their own lives". In the same token Appleyard (1990) describes how the text itself contains no universal truths, rather its meaning and significance can only be revealed to the reader as they start relating this to their own circumstances.

Previous research has found that people read in order to heighten consciousness (Taylor, 1999). Toyne and Usherwood (2001) term this 'escape through association' and record how for some participants, escapism was about comparison with their own circumstances. Ross (1999) conducted approximately two hundred intensive interviews incorporating individuals who read for pleasure to determine the value that reading had in their lives. Although this was not specifically focused on older adults, it did reveal commonalities to the present study. For example, many pleasure readers used books as a source of information to bring understanding and guidance to their own life experience. She continues to explain that personal preoccupations can even act as a filter so that attention is drawn to quite minor themes or plots within the book which address a current need.

For older people, again, a need to maintain a sense of self-identity and a place in a world which has less use for them may explain why some escape to a book in order to explore themselves further, identifying with the story in order to reinforce who they are and what they believe.   Indeed Coleman (1993) believes that the 'challenge' of old age is to maintain a sense of self-esteem, which for some can become an overriding motivation.   Hopefully a book will provide some solace and indeed as A.S. Byatt (in Van Riel, 1992, p17) explains:

> "[reading] reflects and constructs the inner life as nothing else.   It... gives us a set
> of concepts...for understanding what is happening to us, exactly who we are and
> what we're doing".

Chapter four: READING FOR KNOWLEDGE

When questioned about their reasons for reading, a high proportion of respondents across the groups repeatedly stated it is for the knowledge they obtained.

"Well without books I think it would be a poor world, I do honestly.   It educates us for one thing".
F/84/3

"It's just a thirst for knowledge.   It's an instinctive thing".
F/64/1

"I don't care for fictional novels where not very much is happening.   If it's a novel, I'd rather have a more, well, written in a factual way so you can learn something from it as well".
F/69/1

"Knowledge.   Knowledge on everything, you know - life, work, everything !"
F/69/4

"It's knowledge.   You gain a lot of knowledge from reading don't you?.   I think you gain a lot of knowledge from reading, whatever book you read ".
F/69/6

It could be noted, however, that the acquisition of knowledge was not a motive for reading high on the agenda of the older participants in the present study; indeed it was barely alluded to by the oldest group of all - the housebound individuals.   In fact one housebound male of ninety-one implied that the acquisition of knowledge

was not particularly a priority to him at his age.   Instead, older respondents appeared to articulate other benefits of reading with greater emphasis, such as time passing and reminiscence.   This may be explained because these factors become more of a priority in more advanced old age, as discussed in chapters three and six.

Regarding older adults generally, however, gerontological research has identified that learning is one of the roles of leisure which becomes more important in retirement (Bytheway et al., 1990).   Indeed in 'Reading the Situation', the most recent national report investigating the reading habits of British citizens, almost half of older adults read 'to improve knowledge' (Book Marketing Ltd/The Reading Partnership, 2000).   In like manner, studies specifically investigating the reading activities of senior citizens have found the pursuit of knowledge to be a principal motivation.   For example, a survey investigating the reading needs of older adults who visited community centres found that their greatest reading interest was in remaining informed about the world (Anderson, Luster and Woolridge, 1992). Similarly, a study of the reading patterns of elderly people, both residing in residential care and their own homes, concluded that one of the primary reasons for reading was to know and understand current events (Check and Toellner, 1984).

Older adults are aware of the importance of remaining mentally alert (Bytheway et al., 1990) which may go some way to explaining their increased desire to learn in later years.   However, other factors, such as the necessity to maintain self-esteem in a society which no longer has a role for senior citizens, may also contribute to the increased importance this group attach to learning.   All of these matters are discussed in greater depth later or in chapters five and six.

Looking from the wider theoretical framework, the findings of the current research, which indicate that reading is of value in terms of knowledge acquisition, support the underlying methodologies of 'uses and gratifications' theory and reader-response

criticism. Specifically, according to the former, one of the principal gratifications individuals gain from the media is the development of learning and the acquisition of information (Berger, 1995; McQuail, 2000; McQuail, 1997). Correspondingly, the active role of the individual in eliciting information from the text in order to broaden knowledge of people and society, is an example of the reader-response conviction that the reader interacts and responds to the text (Rosenblatt, 1970).

INFORMATION

The ability to obtain factual information and practical instruction was an important aspect of reading for a number of older adults:

"The main thing about those books [historical novels] *is that when you get 'Mastermind' and 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire', my husband's jaw drops open at what I can come out with.   'Oh it's such and such a date' 'Oh he was married to so and so'.   And you get it from those books".*
F/64/7

"If you want to take something to pieces, you know maintenance, I mean I'm in to motor bikes and cars and its got to be something drastic for my car to go into a garage, so I do it myself.   So therefore the only way I can get that knowledge is from a book".
M/64/7

"Something [a book] *that's got a picture on and a bit of writing underneath, and then when you go out you can see these different things. You know where I am, right at the top of the church, I see different kinds of birds and if I see one I haven't seen before, I generally look in a book - or go to the library and get a book - and see what it is".*
F/89/3

"If you had a certain whim, in other words if you were trying to inspire yourself, you will come into the library and look up a certain subject....Yes, if I was starting to think about a certain thing, whatever the subject, I would come to the library and start to build up my knowledge".
F/64/2

It appeared participants appreciated the way in which reading benefited their general knowledge and also the pragmatic assistance it provided for their day-to-day life. This practical use of reading was not more particular to the men in the current inquiry - as perhaps one might expect in a study of this age group - but was only mentioned by one male participant, as cited above. In contrast, the national Book Marketing Ltd/The Reading Partnership survey (2000) reported that in the oldest age band, '55+', higher proportions of males than females read to 'get information/find out things'. The limited number of male participants in the present research may go some way to explaining this discrepancy. Perhaps with larger representation of this gender, reference to reading for practical instruction may have been more common amongst the men.

Scholars of gerontology report that older adults learn new skills and teach themselves from the books they read (Bytheway et al., 1990). For a specific example, a survey of the reading habits of elderly adults in the community conducted by Scales and Biggs (1987) found that reading was used for practical assistance to resolve day-to-day dilemmas.   By the same token, Wilson (1980) reports that reading for older adults serves as a means of obtaining information necessary for everyday living.   This function of reading may be particularly pertinent to older adults today who, due to changes in family structure and location, often find themselves alone and fending for themselves (Bond Coleman and Peace, 1993).

LITERACY SKILLS

An aspect of *"accidental learning"* (F/69/1) which reading produced for the older adults in the present study was the development of their literacy skills.

"I think another really important thing is if you haven't been really well educated, as I haven't - I only had an ordinary school upbringing - you learn words through books.   You learn to spell through reading a book.   It's like having a dictionary as well as a story.   You know you learn all different words and meanings of different words.   Because we don't talk like this, we don't use all these big words".
 F/64/7

"When you're reading you find words that you didn't know about"
F/84/3

"[Reading helps] to know what the word means".
F/69/4

" And that is what reading gives you.   It is reading that puts words in your mouth, you don't have to search for the words".
F/64/7

This improvement to written and spoken English through reading is especially profitable to the individuals in this study, who largely received a limited education - the majority leaving school aged fifteen, and some of the older ones as young as twelve.   Certainly for many British pensioners, the level of education they received was very basic (Morgan, 1992).   However it could be noted that the Afro-Caribbean participants stressed the value of reading in developing their vocabulary skills, for example:

"[reading] *is a good thing.   Even if sometimes I come across some words, I say to myself 'I don't know what that means'....you can look in a dictionary".*
F/69/4

In addition, Afro-Caribbean individuals in both Groups Four and Six, specifically mentioned that knowledge was one of the most beneficial aspects of reading - in fact in Group Four, the majority of participants stated that this was their most important reason for reading.   However for the elderly in Afro-Caribbean communities, the education they received as children was likely to be insufficient (Morgan, 1992) which may explain these findings.

The advancement of literacy abilities in adults through reading was found by Taylor (1999) and Toyne and Usherwood (2001).   Previous studies have found that this is an outcome for older adult readers also.   For example, Wolf (1977) commented on this in his report on the value of reading for elderly residents of retirement homes.

A LOOK AT THE WORLD

A smaller proportion of participants spoke of how reading gave them greater insights into aspects of culture, society and the world that they had no prior knowledge of, and which they found enlightening.

"[reading's] *like a stamp collection.   It opens your horizons and shows you what the world is like".*
 M/64/1

"I take out a book to read.   You learn a lot.   Even if it's only the lightest of novels, it's set somewhere and you've probably never been to that place in your life, but by time you've read the book, you know about it".
F/64/7

"Reading the biography of Desmond Tutu I found made a real difference to the way I thought and inspired me.....he was certainly a very, very brave man to walk out and face the police and guns and defy the state.   And then to say quite honestly that when he got home after that he just sat down and shook.   That he was really no braver than us but was able to bring everything to bear in one particular occasion, and then like us, realised what danger he'd been in and it made him very frightened".
F/64/6

"I think if we are classed as elderly people....We appreciate modern living.   I mean I do like a contemporary novel as it brings you up to date with the younger generation, because they're usually written by younger writers".
F/64/1

A Spanish participant states:

"I mean a detective novel gives you a lot of information, information about the [British] *social life around you and everything going on. Which was something I never knew anything about, so that was very interesting".*

F/69/1

These participants enjoyed the opportunity reading provided to learn about alternative ways of life; they valued remaining informed and educated in this way. A.S. Byatt (in Van Riel, 1992, p16) states that: "through reading you can encounter whole other worlds in terms of your own world". In similar sentiment, Meek (in Elkin and Lonsdale, 1996, p11) describes the reading experience for children, which is equally applicable to adults: "Reading can give people access to more experiences than anyone can encompass in a single lifetime...a book is a place where children can go and try on all the lives they haven't got".

Previous research has produced similar findings. O'Rourke (1993), in her survey of Cleveland library users, found that books were valued and enjoyed for the revelations they brought of different ways of life. Also Taylor (1999) and Toyne and Usherwood (2001) recount how focus group members enjoyed the opportunity to explore other cultures and customs through the books they read.

Reader-response theory asserts how the reader can interact with the text in order to explore the outer world, other perspectives and other ways of life (Rosenblatt, 1970). Learning about society and the world has also been found to be one of the uses people put to the mass media, and the gratification they derive from this (McQuail, 1997; Berger, 1995).

READING TO KEEP THE BRAIN ACTIVE

Closely linked to learning and knowledge was the contribution reading makes to maintaining mental agility, which was frequently mentioned as one of the benefits of this activity:

"Keeping your mind occupied and going.   If you didn't read and you didn't do something, your mind would go blank all together.... Reading is something that keeps you still in this world kind of thing.   You don't go to that factor of 'I don't know what to do, shall I go to sleep?'.   It gets your mind, just keeping it alert".
F/89/3

"To get some motivation really.   To keep something going".
M/64/1

"Well it keeps my brain acting.   I enjoy it and it keeps my brain acting as it should be.   And it leaves me with something to think about , which is good".
F/94/HB

"Yes you've got to keep your brain going".
F/84/2

"To keep the mind alerted and active, not to sink into a decline.   You have to make a conscious effort to keep the mind going".
F/69/1

"It stimulates the brain when you read as well, I'm sure it does".
F/69/6

Respondents found reading encouraged them to remain astute, and also served as a means to avoid apathy and boredom.   Therefore, it seemed from the above responses that these participants recognised the importance of mental stimulation in old age, and valued the way reading assisted this.   Undoubtedly, for elderly people, maintaining good cognitive function and keeping mentally alert is very important. Indeed when older individuals were asked what advice they would give to others about retirement, the second highest response regarded the importance of keeping mentally active (Bytheway et al., 1990).   Other studies have also found that keeping mentally active was a motivation for reading in older people (Smith, 1993).

Certainly the importance attached to remaining mentally stimulated in old age is not without justification, and has been confirmed through research - which also shows that reading can assist in this (Harvey and Dutton, 1979; O'Rourke and Ngandu, 1980).   For example a longitudinal study investigating intelligence levels in older adults, conducted over a fifteen year period, demonstrated that an intellectually stimulating environment contributed to a lack of cognitive decline (Schaie, in Bond, Coleman and Peace, 1993).   Correspondingly, a comparative study of elderly readers and non-readers found the former to have a better mental function (Kido, in Check and Toellner, 1984).   Smith (1995) records how reading in adults can improve cognitive abilities in a number of ways, such as more efficient information processing abilities, and sharper problem solving skills.

Chapter five: READING AS THERAPY

"Books do not shield a person from depression, but they may help him survive it.

They do not protect anyone from loneliness but they might help it to be forgotten in

a moment.   Books can not bring back the past but, like dreams, they can take you

close to your childhood, close to your youth and your first love, close to the

sorrows and joys you lived through"

(Parkkinen, 1990, p19).

READING TO RELAX

Many older adults reported that they read to relax and it was mentioned in five of the
seven focus groups:

*"Mostly relaxation.   Fair enough, it gets me to sit down and read.   That's my
reason, but I'm talking about these days, not years ago".*
F/84/3

*"But the main thing I think we all agree it's this relaxation and winding down of an
evening".*
F/64/2

"Because it may help you to relax".
F/69/4

"That's it, relaxation definitely".

F/69/5

"Also it's for relaxation.   You sort of relax a bit, you're sat down when you're reading".

F/94/6

This was a phenomenon reported by individuals from different age brackets and social class, however it was not referred to by housebound clients.   It is impossible to state for certain why reading to relax was not mentioned by the latter.   One could surmise that because these people are not so physically active, and therefore take life at a slower pace, they have less need to unwind in this way.   However, that would only be theorising.   It is also feasible that in a group context, the triggering of ideas one from another may have promoted housebound individuals to bring to mind the outcome of relaxation, which they appreciated but simply had not recalled. However again this is an hypothesis, not fact, and it still remains curious that this experience was not mentioned by any housebound interviewee.

However, many participants did report that reading provided them with a therapeutic tool to aid relaxation, and for some, this was their most important reason for reading.   Correspondingly, Check and Toellner (1984) found that for elderly individuals, living both independently and in institutions, one of the main purposes for reading was to enable relaxation.   Indeed fifty-five per cent of older adults in Britain today read books in order to relax (Book Marketing Ltd/The Reading Partnership, 2000).

Regarding adult readers generally, Toyne and Usherwood (2001) report that relaxation was one of the most frequently stated motivations for reading.   Likewise the readers of romantic fiction in Radway's (1983) research overwhelmingly cite relaxation as their goal.

The therapeutic relief of tension is of value to older adults. It is important for their psychological welfare to be sure, but it is also important physically. A specialist in relaxation techniques, Madders (1993), describes how prolonged stress within the body has a detrimental effect on the heart and blood pressure causing cardiovascular disease - a biological condition of which elderly people are particularly vulnerable (Moody, 1998).

READING TO SLEEP

The most frequently cited time for reading was last thing at night, as a tool to aid sleep:

"You might have a nice feeling when you go to bed and relax, you know. It gives you something to think about because you've got to think about something to go to sleep. You can't always count sheep".
F/84/3

"Well it's a calming influence of the activities of the evening. Just calming down, reading for an hour and then sleeping".
F/74/1

"I like to read in bed mainly. My last hour is spent reading in bed which I find relaxes me. I look forward to it and I do enjoy it".
F/64/2

"It is more relaxing when you read at night".
F/69/4

"[I read] through the night because I can't sleep".
F/84/5

For some this was almost a necessity, an addiction - a finding which Nell (1988a) also observed:

"I can't sleep until I've read, even if it's just half a chapter".
F/64/7

"I always have a couple of books upstairs and I [read for] *half an hour, well at least half an hour".*
M/64/7

Reading to aid sleep was reported in every focus group, although, again, was not specifically mentioned by housebound clients.   It is unlikely this time that the issue did not occur to these individuals because they were specifically asked "what time of day do you like to read and for what reasons?".   Whilst two of the clients reported reading at night, they did not state that this was to aid sleep.   Again one can only speculate at the reasons for this; perhaps a slower pace of life is also conducive to sleep, or perhaps a long sleep at night was not such a concern to these individuals who may have napped during the day.   However also it should be remembered that the number of housebound interviews was small, and therefore a larger study may have produced different results.

Ross (1999) and O'Rourke (1993) found that the favourite time for reading among their subjects was when they were in bed.   According to psychological theory, reading in bed enables the reader to shut out the activities of the day and induce relaxation essential for sleep, indeed the value of reading for producing a powerful sleep has been documented (Nell, 1988b).   This is again of particular consequence

to older adults.   Whilst lack of sleep can result in tension, depression, anxiety and poor physical health for people of all ages, it is the elderly who are the largest group to be prescribed sleeping tablets (Empson, 1993).   Nocturnal sedation is highly addictive (British Medical Association, 1997) and therefore an alternative aid to sleep, such as reading, is of great value for this age group.

READING AND THE TROUBLED MIND

A smaller but significant number of participants described how reading was a remedy to ease an anxious mind and they spoke of its calming qualities:

"Well, if I'm worrying about anybody, I pick that book up and you know you're into that aren't you , you're not whittling.   'Cause I could whittle myself to death about those two [grand children]*".*
F/84/HB

"You read and you forget your troubles, as you get absorbed in the book".
M/96/HB

"You escape from thinking 'oh I wish so and so' when you read a book and your mind concentrates on that".
F/89/3

"I think it calms me down".
F/64/2

"We all know reading is good, because sometimes it just help you to really settle down in yourself and relax, you know?   You might even have a cup of tea beside you".

F/69/4

"[reading gets you away from] the problems you've got".

F/69/5

The participants' experiences here support the theory of reading therapy because they demonstrates that a simple interaction between the reader and the text can prove mentally soothing.   It could be noted that therapeutic reading of this kind was not directly mentioned by members of Group One, the focus group from the least deprived area.   By emphasising this, it is not to suggest that greater affluence equates with less anxiety; on the contrary, it is probable these individuals had an equal share of concerns.   However what is more likely is these participants had other means of easing a troubled mind.   This group comprised a high proportion of married individuals who therefore, in theory at least, had a partner to share concerns with.   Certainly this was also the group which comprised the youngest members, who were potentially more able to be active and pursue other interests to occupy their minds - and perhaps had greater financial means to do so - than in other groups. Indeed many of the group members mentioned other activities they enjoyed.

However, generally speaking, elderly people are a group who face many adversities. The Sociological Theory of Disengagement describes how older adults in Britain are phased out of their roles and positions of responsibility so that society ceases to depend on them and can continue to function.   However, unsurprisingly, this can prove a stressful and anxious transition for individuals (Bond, Coleman and Peace, 1993; Bytheway et al., 1990).

Financially senior citizens are a group which struggle.   A number of government reforms in the eighties and nineties involved cuts to state pensions, leaving a much higher number of older people on low incomes (Phillipson, 1998; Walker and Naegele, 1999).   Indeed, the British Gas survey (1991) showed that forty-five per cent of elderly respondents reported financial difficulties (in Biggs, 1993).   Also older adults are often confronted with numerous losses which occur in quick succession (Ryan and Patterson, 1987), causing emotional strain.

Previous research has demonstrated the medicinal qualities that reading brings to aging individuals facing apprehension and distress.   For example Rane-Szostak and Herth (1995), in their survey of ex-war veterans, report that the concentration and attention required for the task of reading left no room in the mind for problems.   In like manner, Eriksson (2000) described how poetry helped elderly residents in a nursing home cope with the losses in their lives and brought a sense of well-being. Also, aging individuals in residential care found reading to be a means of strengthening inner resources and an aid to cope with the social changes and ambiguity which can accompany old age (Hunt, 1978).   In fact research claims that older people who read enjoy greater life satisfaction (Smith, 1993; Scales and Biggs, 1987; Check and Toellner, 1984).

Reader-response criticism would see therapeutic reading of the kind discussed as an example of the reader bringing their own particular needs, preoccupations and mood to bear on the meaning of the text.   Therefore, as Rosenblatt (1970) asserts, the same book will have very different meaning and value to us at different times under different circumstances.

Finding solace in Fictional Characters

One elderly individual in the study used a fictional character she'd encountered to resolve a difficulty she faced:

"Dick Francis influenced me.   He's always in trouble.   He stands a lot of pain.   He gets out of difficult situations.   So having said that on the one hand, on the other hand, when I'm in pain, I think of Dick Francis and I think 'Oh come on get on with it!'.   You know and that's the way I overcome it.   But I've always had to overcome it anyway, with not being able to take any drug.   They've helped me, Dick Francis, 'cause I think people can cut themselves or have a serious wound or whatever, fall off a horse or break many bones, and still live.   They still get through it and that's helped".

F/74/7

For this lady, a fictional character proved medicinal and restorative.   She received encouragement that she was not a lone sufferer, and consequently was able to confront her pain.   An advocate of bibliotherapy, Laura Cohen, conducted a series of interviews to determine the ways in which literature was used to help in difficult life situations.   She also found that through certain characters, individuals found shared experience and a feeling of not being alone in their difficulties.   They received hope that their circumstances would change, and the inspiration to take the steps necessary for improving their lives (Cohen, 1994).   Likewise Sabine and Sabine (1983) interviewed avid readers across America and describe how readers found solace through the fictitious people in books, realising that they were not unique.   They also found solutions to their problems through the way literary heroes managed their lives.

READING FOR COMFORT

Housebound individuals and members across the focus groups described how reading was a comfort to them.   For example:

"I started to read in bed after I lost Brad [husband]*, and that was a must.   Five o'clock, six o'clock I used to read to".*
F/74/7

"It's comforting isn't it?".
F/69/1

"A book is something you can turn to anytime of day or night".
F/74/2

"In the winter as well during the day, a cold wet day, I snuggle down and read a book".
F/64/1

"[Reading] *brings all those memories back again, which are very happy memories because I had a husband in those days".*
F/94/HB

"Sometimes when you're reading you feel so uplifted".
F/69/4

Some individuals even described how they re-read childhood favourites, especially during difficult times:

'I'm still addicted to 'who-done-its'.   I think I started when I was about eleven or twelve years old with Agatha Christie.   But I've been reading Agatha Christie since I've been ill....So I've gone through all Christine's [daughter] *you see".*
F/74/7

"I went back and re-read all the books I read as a teenager.   I never told the librarian.   She would say 'who do you fetch these for ?' and I would pretend they were for someone who was unwell.   And I thoroughly enjoyed them.   I didn't even tell anyone I was reading kids books.   I went back as an older person and still enjoyed them".
F/64/7

According to the practice of bibliotherapy, reading can produce a sense of comfort expressed as reassurance and well-being, and re-reading material can renew such feelings (Cohen, 1994).   Indeed Ross (1999, p790) believes that re-reading a childhood favourite is the "quintessence of comfort reading" and describes how the readers in her study were particularly disposed to this during times of stress or busy-ness.

Toyne and Usherwood (2001) provide an account of how adults read to change and lift their mood, and Sabine and Sabine (1983, p92) spoke to readers who claimed books generated happy states such as comfort, release from stress and appreciation for life - "they just make you feel better" one person commented.   Similarly, regarding older adults, Fisher (1988) found that higher readers were likely to have a better disposition in terms of pleasure and happiness - although other factors may have contributed to this also.

However the most enthusiastic reference to reading for comfort was expressed by the Afro-Caribbean group (Group Four) with regard to the spiritual solace they gained from reading the Bible and related literature:

A - (F/69) *"Because sometimes some verse in that Bible, it helps cheer you up.   You feel so down and low in yourself and you take up that Bible - that's a good book to read".*

B - (F/69) *"When you are down and you pick up that Bible and you find a scripture in here, you just feel yourself lift up, you understand.   Especially if you have anything on your mind".*

C - (F/64) *"Boy when I read it I really can't tell you.   It's only me and the Lord know how it's really uplifting, the word for today.   It's a boost".*

(and later)

"Sometimes it gives you like an inner peace".

Although members of other focus groups made reference to comfort, as discussed above, it was the animated and impassioned way in which black elderly individuals shared about this type of reading which was particularly striking.   Cultural differences in expression may partly explain this, however this may also be a response born out of the situations they find themselves in.   For many Afro-Caribbean elders in Britain today, the memories they hold, along with the difficulties of their current circumstances, gives them cause for comfort.   Many members of this community who have reached pensionable age today were in their twenties and

thirties when they came to Britain in the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties. They arrived in a country where it was still legal to discriminate against black individuals in the job and housing markets, and where overt racism was not uncommon (Blackemore and Boneham, 1994).

Elderly Afro-Caribbeans are generally an economically deprived group as many hold too few years employment history to entitle them to a pension (Fennell et al., 1993). To add to their adversity, research has shown that there is a longing amongst this community to return to their homeland, although financially this could not be viable (Bernard and Meada, 1993). In the light of these facts, Norman (in Fennell et al., 1993) believes the black elderly are at risk of 'triple jeopardy' - they are discriminated against because they are old, shown prejudice due to their skin colour and disadvantaged by socio-economic circumstances.

According to Koeing (in Bond, Coleman and Peace, 1993), religious thinking is one of the most effective ways older people control their emotional responses in difficult circumstances. For West Indian elderly communities, as in this present study, religious activity is common, whereby two-thirds of this group attend church regularly (Blakemore and Boneham, 1994; Bernard and Meada, 1993) which is notably higher numbers than amongst their white counterparts. Regarding reading and this group, it is perhaps not suprising that in an extensive investigation into the life conditions and welfare of black elderly people, a startling seventy-eight percent reported that they read their Bibles regularly (Heisel and Larson, 1984). In terms of spiritual reading and older adults generally, studies have found this activity to be important to this age group, and that one of the main purposes for reading is to satisfy spiritual need (Scales, 1996; Check and Toellner, 1984; O'Rourke and Ngandu, 1980).

Chapter six: READING AS A PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE

INTRODUCTION: READING - A VITAL PART OF LIFE

From the group and individual interviews, it soon became apparent just how much reading was an integral and meaningful part of the participants everyday lives.   This was illustrated by the spontaneous comments they offered to describe the pleasure reading brought to their daily routines.   Although the ladies in Group Seven have been used to illustrate this point, their sentiments were shared throughout.

"Now every time there's a bit of sun, me, me book and me glasses shoot out to the garden.   And I'll get up at the crack of dawn just so I can do that, I don't neglect anything.   But to do that for me, it's just, it's just heaven.   The birds are singing and I'm sat in me chair and, oh, that's just the life! ".
F/64/7

One conversation went as follows:

A - *(F/64): "That's one of the pleasures in life, when you come in to the library and there's an author that you really like, and there's a book that you've not read - yes!".*

B - (F/64) *"It makes your day don't it".*

C - (F/74) *"You've found treasure".*

A - (F/64) *"You bounce home don't you, you bounce home!".*

B - (F/64) *"It's as if someone's pushed a ten pound note in your hand"*.

A - (F/64) *"And I can't wait to get in to bed to start it"*.

However perhaps the time when participants communicated most strongly the value and centrality of reading in their lives was when responding to the hypothetical proposition that they were no longer able to read.   This question was consistently met with very emotive responses, where individuals described how this would make them feel using very bleak adjectives, such as 'desperate', 'devastated', 'depressed', 'heart-broken', and 'a blank wall'.   Some respondents described their feelings more fully:

"[Spoken-word cassettes are] *a wonderful help because, oh, I should be in an awful state without them.   Having been a reader all my life, you know loving books, it would have been awful if I couldn't have these.   Oh it's a great pleasure to me"*.
F/94/HB

"It would leave a big whole in your life".
F/69/2

"Without books and without music, let's liken them to that, this world would be a dreary place".
F/64/7

One respondent described her elderly mother-in-law's experience of not being able to read:

"I've witnessed my mother-in-law who died at ninety-eight last year, and her sight was so bad she had nearly ten years of not being able to read...She loved to read prior to that and she was so miserable....And she became really bitter and I could see how devastating it was for somebody not being able to read. You think, oh well someone's got to a certain age, but ten years is a very long time to be living in this world and doing nothing".
F/64/1.

Some individuals even felt that their very reason for living would be gone:

"Well if I ever went blind, I'll probably commit suicide because unless I can read, there's no life for me".
M/94/HB

"It's like your whole life gone, your whole life gone, because you cannot see to read".
F/69/4

"Well life wouldn't be worth living if you couldn't get access to books".
F/74/7.

It seemed that without reading in their everyday lives, many participants would experience profound loss, emptiness or distress. Other studies, which requested individuals to speculate about finding themselves unable to read, have reported similar responses. Ross (1999) describes how readers spoke of the prospect in

terms of absence and deprivation, and in Toyne and Usherwood's (2001) work respondents communicated a sense of deep loss in a manner of similar intensity to the present study.

Check and Toellner (1984, p82) state that "reading is just as important to older adults as to younger persons. The process of reading is required in almost every context of daily living, it is an integral part of every person's life". The following chapter investigates the way reading is wrapped up in of the fabric of the everyday lives of the older adults in this study.

READING TO PASS THE TIME

The use of reading to fill in the hours of the day was mentioned across the groups:

"Well I enjoy a good read because I'm sat down doing nothing".
F/84/5

"You can't put it down and it passes the time on, you don't realise how the time passes"
(Enthusiastic general agreement).
F/89/3

"As you get older, you're not doing as much and you're glad to sit down, and you can't just sit looking at your self!".
F/94/6

"Going back to your question, the reasons for reading, well I think it's to pass time really".

M/64/1

"They're [books] *of value to anybody, but we have more time"*.

F/64/7

"Well for one thing it passes the time on when you're on your own.   It passes the time on when you're on your own and it's a big help".

F/94/6

For some, reading fills the time where other, more physically demanding activities, once did:

"An old age pensioner can snuggle down and read a book and they don't have to go out and play tennis or something like that.   It's an easy activity isn't it? ".

M/64/1

"I would be lost without these tapes.   I used to go out walking and cook but I don't do anything like that now so I would be very very lost wouldn't I?   I sort of depend on these now".

F/94/HB

"Well I used to do a lot of knitting and sewing , but now I can't do it.   Well I haven't got the patience now ".

F/89/3

References to reading and passing the time were more frequent amongst the very elderly respondents, who reported spending a higher proportion of their time reading.   In addition these comments were almost exclusively made by those individuals who were widowed or lived alone.   The obvious inference from this is that for these people, without someone else with whom to communicate, the use of reading to occupy oneself became all the more valuable.   However, as perhaps one might expect, the most noticeable comments on this issue were made by the housebound residents.   Perhaps this was because all of these individuals were not only widowed and lived alone, but also had to face the additional difficulty of a loss of independence.   In these circumstances, reading became a lifeline to counter isolation and empty days:

"When you spend hours on your own, [reading] *is something to think about".*
F/84/HB

"Because when you live alone, there's no conversation, you know you need something or you'd get very dull, and that wouldn't do!".
F/94/HB

"Well for me it passes the day along, quite honestly.   That's the thing, it's getting the day over.   And I enjoy it ".
M/95+/HB

Comparing the current study to previous works examining the experience of reading for adults, the value of reading as a means of passing the time was not a significant finding in many principal studies (Toyne and Usherwood, 2001; Taylor, 1999; Ross, 1999; O'Rourke, 1993).   Therefore, perhaps unsurprisingly, this is a benefit more pertinent to older people.

Research has shown that for elderly people, one of the motivations for reading is to pass the time.   For example, questionnaires completed by 267 elderly persons living in the community demonstrated that a wish to fill the hours in a day was one of the highest motivations for reading (O'Rourke and Ngandu, 1980).   In Wolf's (1977, p16) study, which tackled the question 'What is reading good for?', interviewees recognised the value of reading to fill the time.   One elderly gentleman commented:

> "You think about many things you will do when you retire.   When you get there, however, you often can't or just don't know what to do.   Thank goodness for reading! ".

Undoubtably, retired people do have the potential to find themselves with more spare time (Book Marketing Ltd/The Reading Partnership, 2000) but this can be a more acute issue when they become older.   For some aging individuals, it is not uncommon for their network of social relationships to deplete and for them to find their family are geographically far away - a phenomenon which has increased in post-war years, weakening connections between generations (Bytheway et al., 1990; Bond, Coleman and Peace, 1993).   Elderly people can also feel psychologically isolated because their life history, incorporating living through at least one world war, is so far removed from people's experience today that they feel alone in their memories (Elder, 1977).   Indeed as Rabbitt affirms:

> "[old people] are time travellers, exiled to a foreign country which they now share with current twenty year olds.   These groups have been fed, housed and educated very differently....[and] have been taught to prize different skills and attitudes, and have been shaped by dramatically different circumstances".
> (In Bond, Coleman and Peace, p108)

An unhappy consequence of isolation in the elderly is the advance of loneliness. Loneliness is a psychological phenomenon having powerful implications for mental health and gerontologists believe that the extent of this condition in the aged is grossly underestimated (Ryan and Patterson, 1987). The effects of this occurrence can be devastating for older people who have been reported as being 'shaken' by the extent of their loneliness (Abrams, quoted in Bond, Coleman and Peace, 1993) and who fear this existence far more than they fear dying (Ryan and Patterson, 1987).

However an extensive study regarding pleasure reading and loneliness in later life found repeatedly that those who read for pleasure are rarely lonely. Rane-Szostak and Herth (1995) found that reading provided protection from loneliness primarily because it was a free activity in which participants could engage any time of the day or night - a point which was made by members of this study. Similarly, the role that entertainment can play in reducing the effects of loneliness was demonstrated by research observing media use. This revealed that one of the needs individuals bought to the media was companionship, and that gratification was found through entering into a relationship with fictional characters "as if they could stand in for real people" (Marris and Thornham, 1996, p280).

READING AND TELEVISION VIEWING

Although the subject of reading in comparison to television viewing was not included in the interview schedule, many groups spontaneously volunteered their opinions on this matter. It was decided to include these comments in the report because of the insight they provided, regarding the unique value of reading as a source of entertainment in the everyday lives of participants.

Most of the interviewees reported that they would prefer to read than watch television:

"Primarily, I don't like the television very much nowadays, so I read most nights and evenings.   Well yes I mean the television at the moment is absolutely horrendous".
M/94/HB

"We'd rather read than watch television".
F/84/5

"It's far better than watching the television though".
F/64/1

"It's a good source of entertainment against things like television".
F/64/2

"[If unable to read] You've only got television to look at.   I'll sit all night doing nothing.   Television's not worth watching sometimes".
F/84/6

"You know sometimes I'm looking at television at night and I think, oh I've got to go and get in to me book.   It doesn't matter what I'm watching, it's like drawing me !".
F/64/7.

However, other related studies have found conflicting results.   O'Rourke's (1993) work regarding Cleveland readers showed that those interviewees who preferred reading to television were in the definite minority.   In fact age specific research, looking at community dwelling elderly, also found that television was a prime competitor for the leisure time of older adults (O'Rourke and Ngandu, 1980) and

was even found to be favoured in Check and Toellner's (1984) inquiry. The causes of this discrepancy could be numerous and could only be superficially explained given the limited information available. It is important to reaffirm the qualitative nature of this research, which aimed to gain indepth insight into the experience of a small number of people and was therefore open to the possibility that findings may differ from the elderly community at large.

The Uniqueness of a Book

Participants' reasons for preferring to read fell into two distinct camps. Firstly individuals spoke of the unique qualities a book offered in comparison to the television.

"Television is too visual. [Reading] *sets the brain going, it's like an inner world once you start on a book. It is an inner world and you can see and you can imagine the thing and you think about it. Yes it's different".*
F/64/1

A conversation in Group Two went as follows:

A - (F/69) *"You can see pictures in your own mind whereas television, that's getting at you. In a book you form your own picture in your own mind".*

B - (F/74) *"Each individual character, you see it how you want to see it, and whereas if you watch television, you see it how they portrayed it".*

A - (F/69) *"I mean if you read a book and they put it on the television, it's not the same".*

C - (F/64) *"No if they make films of books they're not the same".*

(General agreement)

A - *"It really takes away from what you've read".*

In Group One, participants discussed the uniqueness of reading also:

A - (F/64) *"It's better than watching television though".*

B - (F/69) *"Far better".*

C - (F/64) *"It gets a lot deeper".*

D - (F/69) *"It sort of stays with you longer.   You can sort of watch something on television and forget it".*

For these participants, therefore, a book was something they preferred because it allowed them to create their own images and was also something which made a more profound and lasting impression in their lives.   Correspondingly, the survey of British Book reading habits also found that a quarter of British adults read because "they consider it to be a special activity, providing them with something that T.V. cannot" (Book Marketing Ltd/The Reading Partnership, 2000, p12).

The Evils of Television

However another factor influencing participant's preference for reading over the television did not so much lie with the intrinsic worth they found in reading itself, but rather could be explained by a strong aversion participants held towards the act of television viewing:

"Yes but you could become a cabbage if you sat and watched the television too much, you're too idle to get up and do anything".

(Strong general agreement from group).
F/89/3

"Unfortunately I've got a portable T.V. in my bedroom which is a bit of a curse. That's one of the reasons I haven't read".
F/69/1

"[Describing watching television] *You'd get like a Zombie ".*
F/74/2

"I could be very apathetic and just sink back and watch the television".
F/69/1

Interviewees appeared to associate television viewing with laziness and mindlessness.   Indeed television is regarded as a "residual category of leisure activity" (Marris and Thornham, 1996, p271) and other studies have come across a moral objection towards this activity amongst readers (Book Marketing Ltd/The Reading Partnership, 2000; Hamshere, 1990; Radway, 1983).   In Taylor's (1999) dissertation, whilst participants initially viewed television negatively in comparison to reading, on reflection they were able to find some value in the former.   However

in contrast, most of the respondents in the present dissertation remained resolute. The reason for these differences may be age related, with upbringing playing a significant part in the formation of opinion.   Also amongst older adults there is a strong motivation to remain mentally alert - an issue discussed in chapter four - which may also have influenced interviewees' preference for what they considered to be a more stimulating leisure activity.

READING AND LIBRARIES

Closely connected to the experience of reading in the every day lives of many older adults is the service of the public library.   Indeed for many senior citizens in the community, this provides a vital access to reading materials and in fact, according to a recent national survey, those over sixty-five are the highest borrower group amongst adults, and this use is increasing (Book Marketing Ltd/The Reading Partnership, 2000).   It was therefore decided to include a question investigating the value of the public library to elderly people, and to examine the role of this institution in their lives.   This will fulfil the secondary objective of the research.

The Value of the Public Library for Older Adults

When questioned about the role of the public library in the lives of older adults, responses across the groups and individual interviews were very positive and people often spoken with conviction:

"The service is excellent I think, really excellent.   You have lovely people working there at the library in that section.   I think they're wonderful.   And if I ever have to ring up the library, they're all so kind and helpful, I think it's wonderful, so a big

thank you to all.   Yes I think it's very very good and when they bring you cassettes

they're all such very very kind people, it's lovely.   So there you are, I'm very

grateful to all".

F/94/HB

"I mean this is a run down area and this [library] *is one of our perks".*

F/69/5

"Well they're great.   A lovely service.   Always on time and they bring you the books

that you want.   Great, great, I've great admiration for the libraries".

M/95+/HB

"There's no substitute for a library".

M/74/7

"It's excellent and anything you want they will bring you the next week or the week

after".

F/64/1

"Libraries and the librarian - they're ever so good".

F/89/3

"I would gladly pay [for a library]*, for the pleasure I get out of books.   That book I*

just bought back, well I ordered it and I paid fifty pence towards it.   It's the best

fifty pence I've spent all month, simple as that!".

F/64/7

Often respondents expressed concern when questioned about the library, worried that this research was an indication of forthcoming closures.   They expressed a dependency on the institution as part of their everyday lives:

"I'd be lost without me library".
F/84/5

"We should be lost without libraries definitely".
F/84/3

"I should miss it terribly".
M/95+/HB

"I think it would be dreadful if we lost our libraries".
F/64/7

It could be noted that the housebound respondents were particularly vocal regarding their appreciation, and the fact that the interviews were made in the company of library staff - in order to avoid the inappropriate scenario of an unaccompanied stranger entering the user's home - may partly explain this enthusiastic response.

However, the housebound respondents did appear genuine in the extent of their appreciation.   Sheffield Housebound service tailors its provision to the reading preferences of each individual client, and indeed every person we visited spoke convincingly of the enjoyment they had received from books recently borrowed. Correspondingly, the most recent national report investigating public library provision for elderly people, documented how housebound clients spoke of the

pleasure they derive from the materials provided, and of the 'lifeline' this service was for them (Edmonds, 1991).   Linley and Usherwood's (1998) investigation of the impact of library services on individuals and communities also report that the housebound service was described as a lifeline for elderly people.

The Role of the Public Library for Older Adults

Obviously many participants who visited the library did so for reading material, however this was not the sole reason, and in one case this was not the situation at all:

"I've been coming to the library for six years".   I'm afraid I don't take out any books.   I don't have much time for reading".
F/84/2

Indeed, it soon became apparent from the group discussions that respondents believed that libraries were of value to older adults for additional purposes other than books, and these will now be outlined.   It is recognised that the role of the public library in the lives of elderly people could easily make for a work of this size in itself, therefore the following section makes no attempts to be an exhaustive account.   However, it was considered important to briefly look at the function the local library has in the everyday lives of older adults due to its interrelation with the reading experience.   Participants primarily spoke of two main benefits the library provided:

The Social Function of the library

Many respondents commented that the library was a place where they could visit in a social context, to meet up with others or make new friends:

"We haven't got a lot going for us. We come every Tuesday morning. When it's bad weather and that, you can pop in here and have a coffee and a natter and if you're on your own, it breaks the day up".
F/69/5

"It's like a different type of social club really, except that we all get books! But we all talk and we all meet one another here".
F/64/2

One lady reflecting on her local library that had closed stated that:
"It was such a civilised place that library. My father-in-law used to go there just to see people around".
F/64/1

Some participants spoke of how they enjoyed visiting the library socially because it offered them a welcoming and comfortable space. Indeed, the library was considered a peaceful place, a retreat, a place to come and be:

"I think libraries are nice places to come in to. You know like a museum or art gallery, they're places of warmth and peace and quiet".
F/64/7

"It's a very calming place isn't it?"
F/64/2

"I wish I could go there one full day and stay there and rest and relax".
F/69/4

According to Matarasso (1998a, p27), "libraries provide a route for individuals, including those who experience deep isolation, to enter and engage with the community and wider society".   He continues to describe how the library serves a particular function for those for whom a regular visit is a valuable part of their weekly routine, which incorporates the elderly - some of whom sought the branch service rather than the housebound, because the social benefits made the effort worthwhile.   The government appears to support the social function of the library in the community.   For example, the Prime Minister's undertaking to tackle social exclusion has led to recent policies aimed at encouraging and supporting all forms of community involvement - of which, according to the former minister for sport and leisure, Chris Smith, libraries have an important role (Perham, 1999).

Linley and Usherwood's (1998) research of the library authorities of Newcastle and Somerset, found the public library to have a significant social function.   Of particular pertinence to this study was their account of the effectiveness of the service in combating social isolation in the lives of the elderly.   Indeed the social interaction which the library enabled was of value to this group, for example through reducing loneliness.   Certainly research has shown the importance of social interaction for elderly people.   For example, it helps prevent depression and confusion which are traits common to elderly individuals (Bowen, 1985).

Information Provision

Many respondents spoke of how they visited the library for information purposes:

"But libraries themselves have all sorts of other, and very important, reasons for being here and reasons for being open and being with us.   We can look round them and read papers in here and [get] *all sorts of information, like Betty's just said, from the librarians.   So just in general knowledge and very much learning, libraries are so important.   There are things other than reading books.   You can go and buy books if you wish".*
F/64/2

"Libraries and the librarian, they're ever so good.   My brother will say to me, if I've got anything I don't understand, he'll say 'go to the library, you know the girls and they know you, go and ask'.   And they're very, very useful.   Very helpful indeed".
F/89/3

"I'm going to Shuttleworth at the end of August, and I've got to find a map to find my way there from somewhere else, do you know what I mean?.   So you're talking about libraries, well I've got access to all ordinance survey books".
M/64/7

"But during the latter years, I've found if there's any help I need I can always get it from the librarians.   I do a lot of competitions and they always put me right with the books, and I've found them to be very helpful".
F/94/2

Therefore, older adults in the current study found the library to be a source of advice and practical information for day-to-day living.   Previous research has also shown that elderly people visit the library to meet information needs.   A major research

project undertaken by Birmingham Library Services, in conjunction with the University of Birmingham Gerontology department, found that a large proportion of elderly respondents visited the library for information purposes (Lucas, 1993). Similarly, a survey of reading patterns and the elderly at the age concern library in Leicester found that readers valued the advice given by library staff (Speak, 1990). Linley and Usherwood (1998) also found that the public library was an important information provider in the community and that it was a 'trusted institution' for personal advice and information.

The information needs of the elderly are diverse, but generally fall into the broad categories of finance, health, retirement and local information (Kleiman, 1995; Lucas, 1993; Edmonds, 1991; Heeks and Kempson, 1985). Regarding welfare information, this is particularly important to elderly people where levels of poverty amongst pensioners are steadily increasing (Ludlem and Smith, 2001) and yet there are many elderly people entitled to benefits but not claiming them (Phillipson, 1998; Dee and Bowen, 1986; Heeks and Kempson, 1985).

Public libraries are uniquely placed to play a key role in ensuring 'information inclusion' for elderly people. According to the Library Association's (1999) code of conduct, librarians are required to "protect and promote the rights of *every* individual to have equal access to sources of information without discrimination". Correspondingly, the Libraries and Museums Act 1964, requires "The Provision of a Comprehensive and Efficient Library Service to all those desiring to make use thereof" (in Edmonds, 1991). Therefore, in theory at least, the British public library system upholds the principle of social inclusion, and this is particularly pertinent to marginal groups such as the elderly. Hendry (2000) believes this philosophy has become increasingly important in the lives of the elderly in recent years when the advance of information technology has the potential to make them increasingly disadvantaged and excluded.

Chapter seven: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter commences with a summary of the significant findings of the research. Following this, the research process is reviewed critically, and its strengths and weaknesses discussed.   The work is considered in the light of the original aims and evaluated in terms of the extent to which it succeeded in achieving these. Suggestions for improvement are also provided.   The questions raised by the research and the potential for future inquiry are discussed in the next section, and finally, any implications the current study provides for future practice are considered.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The elderly community was chosen as the focus for this study due to a general neglect of this group by society.   The specific inquiry, investigating the benefits of reading for this age group, was born out of a gap in knowledge regarding the value of reading for the elderly from a qualitative perspective.   A triangulation approach was used for the inquiry, incorporating the research tools of focus groups, individual interviews and literature review; and a purposive sampling technique was employed to gather participants from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds, and also to gain the perspective of those demonstrating different degrees of independence.

The research showed that reading was beneficial to older adults in four areas:

- Escapism

- Knowledge

- Therapeutic value

- Enhancement to everyday life

Within these themes there were a number of specific advantages reading brought to participants and these are now outlined.

Reading to Escape

The experience of escapism was cited spontaneously and frequently by focus group members and individual interviewees.   Escapism came in a variety of forms. Primarily participants read to dull consciousness.   They hoped that by reading they would remove themselves to an existence very different from their own, which was welcoming and safe.

Reading to dull consciousness was not something referred to by the focus group from the least deprived area.   It may be that financial advantage shielded these individuals from the need to shut out some of the harsher realities of old age, such as loneliness, which is more prevalent in the working classes. In contrast the group which communicated this phenomenon most noticeably were the Afro-Caribbean women who refused to be confronted by unpleasant recollections in historical novels.   This may have been an illustration of this group's need to find protection from their own memories.

Previous research has found reading to dull consciousness to be a strong motivation for reading in adults, and this is especially apparent amongst the female readership of romantic fiction. Regarding older adults, the psychological theory of Erickson's life review suggests that this is a group who may be in particular need of diversion from reality in order to avoid a sense of regret or failure.

Reminiscence was a form of escapism through reading particular to the older and frailer members of the study. For these individuals life review through books proved a positive experience, which enabled them to reflect on their past and find pleasure in re-living the memories prompted by books.

A smaller but significant number of participants, absorbed themselves in a book in order to gain insight and achieve personal growth in their lives - a form of escapism deemed by the psychology of reading literature as reading to heighten consciousness. This incorporated individuals who wished to identify with characters and enjoy self-recognition - a phenomenon pertinent to the working classes, which findings of the current study supported.

The finding of escapism as a reason for reading supports the methodologies underpinning the research. The conviction of reader-response criticism that the reader is an active participant in the reading experience is illustrated by the way an individual brings his own experience and circumstances to bear on the reading experience, to determine his choice of escapism. Findings of 'uses and gratifications' research have demonstrated time and time again that diversion, in the form of a temporary occupation of another world, to be a principal media-person interaction.

Reading for Knowledge

A large proportion of the participants in the study reported that reading enhanced their levels of knowledge in a number of ways. However this finding was not so prevalent amongst the older participants and the housebound. These individuals placed greater emphasis on other uses they had for reading.

Participants gained factual and practical information through reading, to broaden their general knowledge and also to help in the activities of their day-to-day lives. Contrary to previous surveys, however, this was not a finding more pertinent to men. It was felt that with a greater representation of the male gender in the current study, this discrepancy may have been resolved. The literature also describes how older adults have been found to read for practical assistance in their activities of daily living. This use of reading is especially valuable to older adults today where changes in family structure can leave this group increasingly fending for themselves.

The development of literacy skills was achieved through reading for a significant number of respondents. Individuals reported how their vocabulary and understanding of words improved. This experience was relevant to the participants of the current study who had largely received a limited education. The Afro-Caribbean group particularly were of a consensus about this issue, and incidentally placed an emphasis on reading for knowledge - all of which may be explained by the especially poor education of this community. Respondents also described how reading gave them an insight into other cultures and ways of life which they found educational.

Closely linked to the subject of learning was the contribution reading made to maintaining mental agility which was highlighted by many participants across the groups and individual interviews. Participants believed reading was mentally

stimulating and a deterrent from sinking into apathy. Scholars in gerontology found the concept of keeping the brain active to be rated highly by people in retirement. Certainly cognitive stimulation is very important for older adults in order to maintain mental agility and research has shown that reading can assist in problem solving and information processing skills.

From the wider theoretical perspective, knowledge acquisition through reading develops the reader-response notion that readers interact and respond to the text through the way that they elicit information from literature. Correspondingly, this also reflects one of the main findings of mass communication research in that a principal gratification gained from the media is the development of learning and the acquisition of information.

Reading as Therapy

The therapeutic value of reading in the lives of participants was a common theme throughout the groups and individual interviews. A large proportion of respondents shared how reading helped them to relax and unwind. Similarly, many people described how reading was a tool to aid sleep at night - which was cited as the most common time for reading. However housebound residents did not mention the use of reading to encourage relaxation or sleep; possibly the reduced amount of physical activity in their lives may already help in these areas.

The literature supports the finding that reading is a vehicle by which elderly people can relax and unwind. Medical literature also describes how this is of particular benefit to older adults, who are vulnerable to stress related illness and sleeping tablet addiction and would therefore benefit greatly from any means which counters these things.

A smaller but significant proportion of readers in the focus groups and housebound interviews described how reading helped to ease a troubled mind.   It had calming qualities and helped reduce anxieties.   However this was not a quality referred to by the focus group from the least deprived area.   The particular composition of this group, who were generally younger and mostly married, may have enabled them to find relief for troubles from other sources, therefore taking the emphasis off a use for this in reading.

Reading to relieve anxiety is an example of an individual using literature for therapeutic purposes and is an example of bibliotherapy.   Previous research in the field has shown the medicinal qualities reading provides to troubled older individuals in terms of occupying thought, coping with the losses in their lives and encountering social change and ambiguity in later life.

Housebound individuals and readers across the focus groups reported that reading brought them comfort, which for some involved the rereading of childhood favourites.   This reflects the conviction of bibliotherapy that literature can produce a sense of solace and well-being and that these feelings can be renewed by re-reading material.   The most striking account of reading for comfort was found amongst the Afro-Caribbean women who described spiritual reading.   This may be a product of circumstances where memories of the past and current realities are particularly hard to bear.

The therapeutic uses of reading demonstrated by the current study provides support to reader-response theory.   Specifically, active readers bring their own particular needs, preoccupations and mood to bear on the meaning of the text.

Reading as a Part of Life

Reading was an integral part of the everyday lives of the participants in the study. Respondents were spontaneous and exuberant in their comments of the pleasure reading brought to them on a day to day basis. Correspondingly, the prospect of no longer having the ability to read generated impassioned descriptions of profound loss, distress and emptiness. Reading benefited the day to day lives of participants in a number of ways.

Reading was a valuable means to pass the time - to fill the empty hours of the day and an alternative to more energetic activities. This finding was more pertinent to older and frailer individuals, those who lived alone and especially the housebound. Factors such as a decline in independence and companionship may have contributed to this.

Gerontological theory describes how elderly people have greater amounts of free time and that this is potentially a problem as they progress into very old age. As social networks deplete and family units are dispersed, older adults can become lonely - a widespread phenomenon in this age group.

Previous research agrees that reading is an effective means to pass the time for elderly people in both community and residential settings. The literature also shows that this can be a deterrent from loneliness. This finding is also supported by the underlying theory of uses and gratifications research which demonstrates that individuals bring to the media a need for companionship and are recompensed by the fictional characters who serve as substitutes for real people.

For a large proportion of respondents, reading was a distinct and special source of entertainment in their everyday lives and this became evident as they compared this activity to television viewing.   Participants described how books were unique and able to stimulate the imagination, producing a lasting impression in a way that television could not.   However participants' preference for books was also born out of a strong moral objection to the idleness and laziness they associated with television viewing.

Previous research examining the perception of reading as compared to television viewing in older adults contradicts the current findings and reports that the elderly prefer the latter.   The discrepancy can be explained in part by the qualitative nature of the present study which does not allege to be representative of the wider population.

Closely connected to the reading experience in the everyday lives of a large proportion of participants was the public library, where they accessed their books. The public library was something participants across the focus groups and individual interviews thought was of great value to older adults and of which they spoke very strongly.   A significant number of individuals portrayed a dependence on this institution in their lives.   This was especially notable in the housebond respondents, whose intensity of response may have been influenced by the presence of library staff.

Participants spoke of two prime functions of the public library in their lives, aside from gaining reading materials.   The library was a social centre, providing a place to be, which was welcoming, comfortable and warm and where they could meet with friends.   The library was also a source of information and advice for day to day practical living and general knowledge.

Recent interest in research focusing on the impact of the public library in the lives of individuals and communities also found that this institution provides social significance in the weekly routine of the elderly, and prevents isolation.   Current government initiatives potentially strengthen the public library's role as a social centre for the community.   In addition, the public library was found to be an institution in which people put their confidence, regarding instruction and information.

EVALUATION OF THE RESEARCH

The research process was reviewed, in part, in chapter two under the heading 'lessons learnt'.   To avoid any repetition, readers are referred back to this section in order to gain the full picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the work, for example for details of suggested improvements regarding the housebound interviews.

Generally speaking, the topic of reading worked well in a group discussion, and individuals were willing to join in and contribute their opinions and experiences.   It appeared that participants were relaxed and enjoyed the interaction.   Another strength of the current study was that it incorporated a wide variety of people. Respondents differed in their ethnic and social backgrounds, their level of independence and the degree to which they had advanced towards old age. Therefore the reading experience for older adults was investigated from a number of perspectives.

It could be noted however the sample was imbalanced in terms of gender, resulting in a larger female representation.   Previous studies involving older adults

demonstrate a similar occurrence (Scales, 1996; Scales, Harvey and Brown, 1993; Fisher, 1988; Scales and Biggs, 1987). Indeed, there is generally a greater longevity of women than men, leaving an imbalance of numbers in older adults (Bond, Coleman and Peace, 1993). However in spite of these facts, it is still felt that this research would have benefited from a larger male representation. It was difficult, in the limited time available, to place too many criteria on selection. For the organisations willing to cooperate, time was often limited which in effect meant recruiting whoever was willing and available on the day - which, without exception, proved to be largely female. If time were permitting, it would have been advantageous to recruit a further male dominated group once the gender imbalance became apparent.

As discussed in chapter two, a number of alterations and improvements were made to the focus groups as the sessions progressed. For example, the interview schedule was moderated slightly, and also moderator skills developed to encourage more depth of response. Ideally, to achieve the highest quality research from the onset, a small number of pilot groups should be conducted in order to test the effectiveness of the proposed questions, and to enable the moderator to practice his/her skills.

Overall, in light of the original aims, the current research accomplished what it set out to do. The principal purpose - to investigate the benefits of reading for elderly people who live in the community - was achieved. Through the process of focus groups and individual interviews, the research identified four main areas in which older adults profit through reading. Through demonstrating how reading enriches the lives of older adults, the study also illustrated the importance of one aspect of the public library's service to this group, and therefore fulfilled the second objective. Finally, due to its interrelation with the reading experience, the research considered the value of the public library to older adults and the functions it served, therefore achieving the secondary objective of the study.

POTENTIAL FOR FUTURE INQUIRY

The research process and findings of the present research pave the way for future inquiry regarding the subject of reading and older adults. As described above, the low representation of men in the current study suggests an opening for a future investigation focusing more from the perspective of the elderly man, to provide a more complete picture of the reading experience in older adults.

The current research found a variance of reading experience between older adults from different social classes and ethnic groups, and also between those in different stages of dependency. In the main, the present study was only able to highlight these differences and provide speculative explanations as to why they occurred. In order to provide depth of insight regarding these issues, subsequent research could take a single variant, such as ethnic background, and frame a more specific inquiry around this.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LIBRARY PRACTICE

From the introductory chapter it has been suggested that the elderly are generally an overlooked group by society and that public library services to senior citizens indicate room for improvement. However, as a small measure to counter this trend, the current study provides evidence to the library profession of the important function it fulfils in the lives of elderly people through the reading materials loaned. Hopefully this will provide inspiration regarding practice in that it may encourage managers and staff to review current provision to this age group. Implications may involve reviewing library practice in the areas of marketing strategies to promote reading amongst the elderly, stock selection and information provision.

The current study demonstrates the therapeutic value of reading. Literature was shown to prove medicinal in many ways including the provision of consolation, relief for anxiety, assistance to adjust to life's changes and as an aid to relaxation. A small number of public libraries have recognised the therapeutic potential of books and have instigated schemes to further the practice of reading therapy in their locality. The current study provides evidence to encourage more widespread work in this area.

Suggestions like the above may have more impact in the library profession if they were emphasised in training. However, the increased attention given to information technologies is in danger of overshadowing the public service ethic in library training (Buttlar and Du Mont, 1996; Worpole, 1995). Indeed a review of university prospectuses (Available:http://www.mit.edu:8001/people/cdemello/uk.html) reveals that the study of services to the elderly receives marginal attention. Likewise, whilst bibliotherapy has proved fashionable at various times, it is not a prominent feature in today's library school. These are both valuable practices in the library profession which, however, are not always acknowledged in this way. In particular, if provision to the elderly is no longer to be the "poor relation to the services" (in Edmonds, 1991) and public libraries are not to perpetuate the wider societal neglect of this group, then this service should be given recognition and a proper introduction from the onset.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule - Focus Groups And Individual Interviews

Introduction

Moderator introduces herself and explains reasons for the study.   Respondents are assured of anonymity and confidentiality.   Respondents are notified of recording equipment and consent acquired.   Open discussion encouraged and respondents assured that their opinions and experience are important, and therefore no answers can be right or wrong.

1. What time of day do you read, and for what reasons?

General question, to establish rapport.   May also provide insight regarding the uses respondents have for reading.

2. Tell me about the types of books you like to read.

General question, to establish rapport.

3. Has a book ever made you think in a different way?

Specific question used to focus more on possible impact of reading in lives of respondents.

4. What are your reasons for reading?

Key question.   A direct query to establish benefits, if any, of reading for respondents.

5. If you were no longer able to read, how do you think this might affect you?

Key question to establish extent to which reading impacts the lives of respondents.

6. Do you think the libraries in Sheffield are of value to older people?

Question relating to the wider reading experience and the secondary objective of the study.

7. Of all your reasons for reading, which is the most important?

Question used to clarify the aspects of reading most important to respondents.   Also, provides another opportunity for respondents to talk again about the key issues and mention anything they may have missed.

Closing Statement

Thank respondents for participating.   Provide information regarding opportunity to view completed report if desired.

Appendix B

Please write in the following details.

(All information will be kept in strictest confidence).

1. What is your name?

2. How old are you?   (please tick)   **60-64**

                                                                        65-69

                                                                        70-74

                                                                        75-79

                                                                        80-84

                                                                        85-89

                                                                        90-94

                                                                            95+

4. Are you married/single/widowed/divorced?   (please delete)

5. At what age did you leave school?

     Did you complete any further education?.

6. What was your occupation?.

7. Which area of Sheffield do you live in?