



# Generating knowhow in later life

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We live in a complex world in which we are increasingly required to take responsibility as individuals for the choices we make and their contingent risks. In this environment, how do older adults know how to live healthy and fulfilling lives in the face of a tsunami of information and a plethora of choices? This study set out to explore the knowhow Australians value in later life and how they acquire it.

## Key points

While the content of the knowhow that is valued revealed few surprises, it was striking how essential communal environments are in affording the conditions, often serendipitously, for its creation.

- Knowhow is difficult to define. Largely tacit, it is the intuitive ability of 'knowing what's the right thing to do with the right kind of thing' (Harnad 2007, p. 1).
- Knowhow that is highly valued is focused on maintaining wellbeing by competently managing the mundane matters of life such as:
  - maintaining social connectedness and good health
  - looking after personal finances
  - accessing information and services
  - making transitions and managing changes such as downsizing, becoming a carer, becoming disabled, bereavement.
- Knowhow evolves in the company of others. Together older adults not only acquire knowhow, they create it in a dialogic process and generate it through their social networks.
- The generation of knowhow depends on an environment that is conducive to opportunities for rich and sustained social interaction.
- Social isolation is the enemy of knowhow.

## The research

This research sought to answer three questions:

- What is 'knowhow'?
- What knowhow is most highly valued in later life?
- How do older adults acquire knowhow?

For the purposes of this study we conceived of knowhow as some dynamic coalescence of the knowledge, information and skills that enable us to adapt and respond to the changing world in which we live.

## Methodology

We conducted seven semi-structured interviews and four focus groups with a total of 32 older adults in a variety of locations across Melbourne.

Interview transcripts were analysed using a grounded theory approach.

## Findings

### What is knowhow?

Interview and focus group participants found it difficult to articulate the notion of 'knowhow'. As one person said, knowhow is 'nebulous'. Nevertheless many research participants were able to describe knowhow as useful or functional knowledge, what is required to perform competently in society. Some understood it as 'just bringing out what you've got':

[Knowhow] comes from somewhere within you, that little piece of information is somehow buried in there and comes out and you just do it.

Most frequently the idea of knowhow was equated with experience of life.

### **What knowhow is valued?**

The research participants were much clearer about what knowhow is valuable in later life. This revolved around four main themes:

- Basic life skills included literacy and household management.
- Functional knowhow for managing everyday life included financial matters and government entitlements, information and communication technologies, housing and property maintenance, and accessing services.
- Knowhow about health and wellbeing for self and others included ways of maintaining and managing good health such as nutrition, fitness and medication, and managing disability or serious illness.
- Knowhow about later life events and transitions included gathering insights into possible future scenarios such as cognitive impairment, bereavement, living alone, caring or being cared for. This led to knowhow to plan for the later years of life, especially maintaining independence, maximising control of their lives, and understanding the late ageing process, their options for care and death and dying.

By contrast, the meaning or purpose of life received little mention as a type of knowhow.

### **How is knowhow acquired?**

Five themes emerged relating to how knowhow is acquired in later life: personal attributes, access to information, accumulating knowhow through life experience, intentional pursuit of knowhow and social engagement. For this group of older adults, the richest mode of acquiring knowhow is through social contact, followed closely by life experience.

#### **Personal attributes and skills**

Personal attributes are important enablers of knowhow for older adults. Research participants nominated such attributes as interest, curiosity, initiative, effort, self-direction, self-discipline, responsibility and self-confidence. Also important were skills such as literacy and problem solving.

#### **Access to information**

Much information is acquired in later life by word of mouth and, as would be expected, the internet, the

various media, local government and service agencies are important sources of information.

#### **Accumulation through life experience**

Later life brings with it a store of accumulated knowhow on which older adults draw constantly, remembering, interpreting and re-interpreting it in different situations and combining it with knowhow born of new experiences as they unfold.

#### **Intentional pursuit of knowhow**

While most participants believed they developed knowhow through learning from experience, a few spoke of intentional strategies to build knowhow for particular interests or hobbies.

Formal learning, in the sense of being taught, was seldom mentioned. It was evident that educational courses played only a very small part in contributing to what participants regarded as knowhow.

#### **Social engagement**

Social interaction was implicitly and explicitly by far the most prevalent and highly valued means of acquiring knowhow for the 32 focus group and interview participants. Observation and 'eavesdropping', day-to-day conversation, clarifying and verifying information with others, and group activities are all important to the generation of knowhow.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Knowhow is a largely tacit capability which is difficult to define. In the lives of older adults it is often created in a dialogic process and generated through social interaction. It accumulates incidentally and serendipitously through life experience. It depends heavily on living in an environment conducive to opportunities for social contact with family, friends and wider social networks where observations and conversations, both incidental and purposive, take place.

The generation of knowhow is a social and complementary process. It is akin to Bandura's theory of reciprocal determinism, which asserts that a person's behaviour, environment and personal qualities all reciprocally influence each other (Bandura 1971).

One lens for understanding this reciprocity is provided by the four kinds of capabilities Nussbaum argues are

essential to living lives we have reason to value.

These are:

- *basic capabilities*—the immutable capabilities a person is born with. This means a person's potential, which may or may not be developed in later stages of life
- *internal capabilities*—capabilities a person develops throughout life
- *external capabilities*—either freedoms or choices given, or constraints or limits imposed, by a person's social environment
- *combined capabilities*—the interplay of internal and external capabilities (or the lack of them) that enable or constrain a person from living a valued life (Nussbaum 1999, p. 44).

As adults age, they can continue to enhance their capabilities providing they live in an enabling environment. For the generation of knowhow this means having ample opportunities to be in the company of others so as to develop and exercise their knowhow individually and communally. This is essential if older adults are to live well in a complex and dynamic society.

## References

Bandura, A 1971, *Social learning theory*, General Learning Press, New York.

Harnad, S 2007, *From knowing how to knowing that: acquiring categories by word of mouth*, presented at the Workshop on Naturalised Epistemology, Kazimierz, Poland, 1–5 September.

Nussbaum, M 1999, *Sex and social justice*, Oxford University Press, New York.

## About the project

This research was funded by the Brotherhood of St Laurence Aged and Community Care Trust Fund. It is part of a larger research and service development initiative which embraces what older adults and users of Brotherhood aged services value in life, what capabilities they aspire to, how current services enhance capabilities and how to integrate the capability approach into service provision.

## For further information

The full report, *Generating knowhow in later life* (PDF file, 328 KB) by Helen Kimberley, Bonnie Simons and Seuwandi Wickramasinghe, may be downloaded from the Brotherhood of St Laurence website.

For other relevant Brotherhood publications see <[www.bsl.org.au/knowledge/publications/](http://www.bsl.org.au/knowledge/publications/)>.

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