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Abstract: This exploration of the role of information in helping people to develop and sustain feelings of belonging, or a sense of place, is based on a study that investigated the reasons for the high population turnover in the Northern Territory of Australia. The Northern Territory along with Darwin, its capital, has a number of unusual characteristics including geographical isolation. A key component of the theoretical framework for the research focuses on social information, which has similarities to the more commonly termed everyday life information. The specific concern is with the kind of information that helps people connect to a community and is clearly linked with social networking. The sample for the major empirical component for the article was recruited at Darwins Mindil Beach Market. In telephone phone interviews with those who had agreed to participate, participants discussed how they learned about Darwin and the Northern Territory, and their views of Darwin as a place to live. Interpersonal contacts, including at the Market and at special events, were most often mentioned in relation to information, confirming literature findings on the importance of family and friends as an information source. Other sources were newspapers and physical markers around the City of Darwin. The conclusion is that the processes of social networking, which work well for some residents, could be enhanced through the use of information grounds, a concept widely discussed in the library and information science literature. Obvious information grounds in Darwin, where the usual processes could be enhanced by the distribution of information by formal information providers, include Mindil Beach Market and the special events for which Darwin is renowned.

Developing and Sustaining a Sense of Place: The Role of Social Information

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Developing and Sustaining a Sense of Place: The Role of Social Information

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the role of information in helping people to develop

and sustain feelings of belonging, or a sense of place. It is based on a study that investigated

the reasons for the high population turnover in the Northern Territory of Australia. The

Northern Territory along with Darwin, its capital, has a number of unusual characteristics

including geographical isolation. A key component of the theoretical framework for the research focuses on social information which has similarities to the more commonly termed "everyday life information". The specific concern is with the kind of information that helps people connect to a community and is clearly linked with social networking. The sample for the major empirical component for the article was recruited at Darwin's Mindil Beach Market. In telephone phone interviews with those who had agreed to participate, participants discussed how they learned about Darwin and the Northern Territory, and their views of Darwin as a place to live. Interpersonal contacts, including at the Market and at special events, were most often mentioned in relation to information, confirming literature findings on the importance of family and friends as an information source. Other sources were newspapers and physical markers around the City of Darwin. The conclusion is that the processes of social networking, which work well for some residents, could be enhanced through the use of "information grounds", a concept widely discussed in the library and information science literature. Obvious information grounds in Darwin, where the processes of information grounds could be enhanced by the distribution of information by formal information providers, include Mindil Beach Market and the special events for which Darwin is renowned.

1. Introduction

What part does social information, or information that will help people to live their daily lives (Moore 2002), play in assisting people to adjust to a new place particularly when they move to live in a new part of the world, very different from their former place of abode? This article will discuss issues connected with identification with place, in the context of an Australian Research Council Linkage project that focussed on what can be done to ameliorate the high

level of population turnover in the Northern Territory in Australia. One particular focus of the project was on the issue of how social memory is generated (Roberts & Young 2008). The "information" question came to be linked, as information seemed to be a key element in the fostering of social memory and a sense of belonging

"Everyday life information seeking" (ELIS) has been considered an important area of human information behavior (HIB) for some time. Major watershed studies of the everyday information needs of citizens were undertaken in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s by Warner, Murray and Palmour (1973), Dervin et al (1976), and Chen and Hernon (1982). More recently, Savolainen and his Finnish colleagues have made a considerable contribution, both theoretically and empirically, to this field of study (e.g., Savolainen 1995, Savolainen 2009). There have also been innumerable studies of ELIS focussed on specific demographic groups of citizens or for particular information topics. For example, major studies of the information needs and behaviors of older people were undertaken by Chatman (1991; 1992) and Williamson (1995, 1998) and of immigrants by Shoham and Strauss (2008). Examples of information seeking for particular topics include cancer of various types (Fourie 2008; Williamson 2005), the management of small and medium enterprises (Sen and Taylor 2007) and online investment (Williamson 2008)

Another less frequently used term, with a similar meaning to ELIS, is 'social information'. Moore (2002) discussed a model of social information need, described in more detail below, which he saw as having six different dimensions: function (why people need information), form (the kind of information people need); clusters (what people need information about); agents (initiators of information activity); users (with different needs); and mechanisms (which can be used to meet information needs). The second dimension, the form of information, taken

in the context of this article as "the source"; the fourth dimension, the agents who initiate information activity; and the last dimension ways to meet information needs), are particularly pertinent to this article

The research question that this article sets out to explore is: What is the potential role of social information in enabling inhabitants, of a particular place of abode, to develop and sustain a sense of belonging or a sense of place? The question pertains to the role that social information can play in assisting people to (a) begin life in a new place or (b) live a fulfilled life in a place that has been familiar during the whole of a life-time or of a substantial part thereof. The place in question is Darwin, which is situated at the extreme north of the vast Australian continent and which is the capital of the Northern Territory. It has particular characteristics which make it interesting with regard to issues of people developing and sustaining a sense of place, especially the fact that people come to, and go from, Darwin (and indeed the Northern Territory) with much greater frequency than occurs in other places in Australia. For example, in 2001, 25% of the Northern Territory population had lived elsewhere five years prior, compared with less than 10% for most other Australian states (Roberts and Young 2008). The reasons for this high population turnover are discussed below. Yet the research discussed in this article (referred to as the Darwin project), indicates that many people succeed in developing and sustaining a sense of place and that social information may play an important role in this.   Sub-questions to be explored are: From where or how do inhabitants find information about Darwin and the Northern Territory that might assist them to feel a sense of belonging? What can be done to enhance this process?

The particular focus of the social information relevant to this article is much narrower than that considered by Moore (2002) or by the broad studies of ELIS, mentioned above. The social

information considered here is of the kind that helps people connect to a community, the argument being that this is still a very important form of information. Part of this proposition is that social information exchange is often inextricably linked to social networking. The term "social information", with its social networking implication, has been used in this article, rather than ELIS which is more commonly found in the literature.

Brief background information about Darwin follows before the problem statement for the article is outlined. The article then discusses additional literature relevant to the research and the method used for the study, outlines the findings, and then presents a discussion and conclusion.

1.1 Darwin and the Northern Territory

Darwin is Australia's smallest capital city, having a population of about 97,000 which constitutes nearly half of the Northern Territory population of 210,000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008). It is the main commercial and administrative centre of the Northern Territory, and has a significant proportion of its working population employed in government service. Apart from its high population turnover and its small size, Darwin is different in other ways from other Australian capital cities, although it has some similarities with Australia's capital, Canberra, which is also a small city with a high number of public servants   Features that set Darwin apart are its remoteness and reliance on expensive air transport to connect it to the rest of Australia (an important element in the high population turnover); its tropical climate; its younger median population age compared with that of the Australian population (Darwin City Council 2010) and its large Indigenous population.

Often cast as the new frontier, Darwin is a city that attracts many short-term sojourners, who come for a period of temporary re-location, from six months to two or three years. According to the Northern Territory Population Mobility Survey of 2006 (part of the Darwin project), 47.7% of the 1469 respondents had come to Darwin for their own work and 10.4% for their spouse's work (Carson 2008).

One particular feature of Darwin, important to the project under consideration, is the Mindil Beach Market, held twice a week in the dry season. Set in a scenically beautiful place, alongside the beach, the market is a very popular spot with Darwin residents, old and new. For the most part, the stalls sell food which people buy and often eat sitting on the beach, watching the famous sunset. It is a place of considerable social interaction and conviviality.

2. Problem statement

The notion that information has a range of purposes has longevity in the literature. In a major study of United States citizens, Dervin (1976) explored the theory that information provides support, clarification and understanding, as well as aiding decision making and problem solving. In an Australian study, Williamson (1984) further developed the concept of information playing multiple roles, including the support often received along with information from personal information sources such as family and friends.

Underpinned by the concept of information having diverse roles, the problem at the centre of this article is whether there is potential for social information to assist residents of a particular locality – new and old – to develop and sustain a sense of belonging. As mentioned above, social information that connects people to a community and which occurs through social networking, even if some of it is misinformation, is a particular focus of the article. The article

proposes that the support and understanding provided by information, as well as its practical value for everyday living, will play a part in this process. In this context, the form, or source of information, is important.

On another level, the problem includes an exploration of whether the provision of a rich information environment may also assist citizens to relate more closely to their place of abode.

3. Literature Review

While the role of information in the development of a sense of belonging or sense of place was not identified specifically from the literature search, a number of studies, e.g., Fisher, Durrance, and Hinton (2004), have considered the role of information in assisting immigrants to adjust to life in a new country. Recently, Shoham and Strauss (2008) explored the part played by the meeting of information needs in the absorption of new Israeli immigrants. These studies provide some comparability to the current project where new residents in Darwin are in a similar situation to immigrants to a new country. Shoham and Strauss's conclusion was that satisfaction of information needs leads to the satisfaction of basic human needs "which then leads to the achievement of a sense of belonging and a sense of self" (np). They found that "all their interviewees, except one, rated information an extremely important factor in their absorption process and eight families viewed information as crucial" (np).

The other literature considered here concerns: (1) conceptualisations of place; (2) information seeking or acquisition relevant to the study; and (3) information provision, particularly the role of information grounds.

3.1 Conceptualisations of place

Since the advent of the Internet, conceptualisations of place have changed significantly, to a large extent connected with changes in views of what constitutes a community. Even before the extraordinary changes wrought by the availability of personal computers, and then the Internet, Wellman and Leighton (1979) argued that "neighbourhood" formed just one of multiple social networks in which people participated. Wellman and Leighton saw communities as spheres of interaction. Thus communities began to be understood from a social network analysis perspective, as developed by Wellman and Wortley (1990); Preece (2000); and Boase and Wellman (2004). Social network analysis focuses on networks, these days particularly computer ones, connecting people as social entities, recognising that any one person can participate in multiple social networks.

Massey (1994), whose focus is "place", took a similar approach to those of the researchers, mentioned above, whose focus is "community". He was influenced by Giddens' view that "modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between 'absent' others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction" (Giddens 1990, 18; cited by Massey 1994, p. 6). Thus Massey argued against the conceptualisation of place as static, but rather postulated that the spatial should be "thought of in the context of space-time and as formed out of social interrelations at all scales" (p. 5). Place then becomes "a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings" (p. 5). Nevertheless the social relations, defining the uniqueness of a particular place, are not necessarily contained within the place itself, but extend well beyond to the world outside. Thus each particular place is never fixed but changes constantly. As Massey expressed it, "places viewed this way are open and porous"(p. 5).

Whilst these views, regarding new concepts of places and communities, are convincing, Gruenewald (2003) made a counter argument that place, in the locational sense, still matters. Citing Geertz (1996, p. 259) as saying: "[N]o one lives in the world in general", he suggested that "people make places and that places make people" and, further, "as occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identities and our possibilities are shaped" (p.621). He also agreed with several other authors, e.g., Feld and Basso (1996; cited by Gruenewald 2003) that "culture and place are deeply intertwined" (p. 621) Thus there is the argument that feeling "at home" and "connected" in a place of abode is important to human well-being.

3.2 The potential role of information

The Moore (2002) framework is useful because, unlike most other authors, he placed considerable emphasis, when discussing the "form" of information, on the role of environmental scanning in information acquisition (p. 298). Related is his highlighting of the importance of "passive absorption of information" which he discussed in relation to "agents" or the initiators of information (p. 301). Both of these aspects played a part in the Darwin project.

2.2.1 Environmental scanning and passive absorption of information

For the most part, people's understanding of the world "comes about through random and unstructured acquisition and processing of information" (Moore, 2002, p. 298). Although not as widely discussed in the literature as purposeful information seeking, this idea is not new. As early as 1977, P. Wilson postulated the notion that people incidentally acquire information through monitoring their environment by personal observations, discussions with friends, relatives and colleagues, and by use of the mass media. Later Bates (2002) proposed that "it is

not unreasonable to guess that we absorb perhaps 80% of all our knowledge through simply being aware, being conscious and sentient in our social context and physical environment" (p. 4). She gave equal emphasis to the active and passive in her "modes of information seeking"(p. 4).

T.D. Wilson (2000) also recognised this notion, including "passive information seeking" in his updated model, although this term can be seen to imply the encountering of information, by chance, where the seeker is already aware of a need. As Williamson's (1998) research indicated, an information need is sometimes not perceived until information is actually encountered. She found that interpersonal sources and the mass media were very important for her sample of 202 older people, aged 60 and over.

Because of passive absorption, the amount of information in the environment where people live determines the amount they absorb, to a large extent (Moore, 2002, p. 301). Although absorption of information undoubtedly also depends on the extent to which individuals are "tuned in" to information in the environment, the provision of an information-rich environment should assist people to acquire information which could improve their connections to a new place of abode – or even to a well-established one. The researchers, in the Darwin project, also believed that information in the environment was important for the generation of social memory (Roberts and Young 2008).

2.2.2 Interpersonal information sources

In discussing agents, one important omission in Moore's framework, is the role of interpersonal sources of information. His emphasis is on formal providers of information. Yet a vast range of research, going back many years, has indicated that people turn to people whom

they know, particularly friends and family for information (e.g., Chen & Hernon 1982; Williamson 1998 in the field of everyday life information; and Heinstrom 2002; George, Bright, Hurlbert, Linke, St. Clair, Stein 2006, in the field of university education). The fact that support and sympathy may be required as much as information could also be a reason why information seekers so often turn to sources whom they know personally (Dervin 1976, p.30). It should be noted that, in the medical field, support groups of peers, involving information exchange, are perceived as useful in assisting people to understand, and come to terms with, their illness. (See, e.g., Klemm, Bunnell, Cullen, Soneji, Gibbons & Holecek (2003), focussed on online cancer support groups; and Kummervold, Gammon, Bergvik, Johnsen, Hasvold & Rosenvinge (2002) focussed on online support groups for mental health.)

2.2.3 Information grounds

Connected to the notions of the importance of information in the environment and of interpersonal information sources, is the concept of "information grounds", which Karen Fisher (née Pettigrew), the initiator, sees as metaphorically akin to the rich fishing grounds off Newfoundland, Canada, where she grew up. The concept has been developed and tested in a series of research projects, which have revealed a wide variety of information grounds which, according to Pettigrew (1999), are environments where people "have come together to perform a given task, but from which emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information" (p. 811). Later Fisher, Durance and Hinton (2004) talked of people in situations "where they share information on varied topics as a result of proximity and common activity" (p.758). Examples of information grounds that emerged from Pettigrew/Fisher's work include community clinics (Pettigrew 1999); literacy and coping programs in a public library (Fisher, Durrance & Hinton 2004); places of worship and

workplaces (Fisher, Naumer, Durrance, Stromski & Christiansen 2005); and schools and university campuses (Fisher, Landry & Naumer 2007).

There is a link between the Fisher concept and Granovetter's (1973; 1982) "strength of weak ties" theory, as was made clear by the former in some of her articles (e.g., Fisher, Landry & Naumer 2007). Granovetter proposed that weak ties, e.g., acquaintances and distant friends, are more valuable as information sources than strong ties, e.g., family and close friends, as the former provide information that is "new". On the other hand, the latter are important as information validators and the providers of the affective dimension, i.e, of support, as discussed above.

The salient components of information grounds were outlined by Fisher, Durrance, and Hinton (2004) through a series of propositions of which the most relevant to this article are: (1) that "people gather at information grounds for a primary, instrumental purpose other than information sharing"; (2) that "social interaction is a primary activity at information grounds such that information flow is a by-product"; and (3) that "information grounds can occur anywhere, in any type of temporal setting and are predicated on the presence of individuals" (p. 756). While the spontaneity and serendipity of information grounds were initially considered fundamental, Fisher, Landry and Naumer (2007) suggested that substantial work is needed to ascertain "how they may be engineered to facilitate everyday information flow" (n.p.). In similar vein, Williamson and Asla (2009) argued that, in retirement communities, catering for people in the Fourth Age, a stage of increasing dependence and disability, the development of artificial grounds can be helpful. In other words, artificial social gatherings can be created where information can be disseminated in an attempt to compensate for declining skills and attributes of residents.

With regard to the Darwin project, Mindil Beach Market was regarded by the researchers as a natural information ground, as indicated by the findings and discussed in the conclusion. The researchers believe that Darwin iconic regular markets during the dry season could be used to great effect for social information.

3. Method

There are several components of the project's method, with not all being of equal value in relation to this article. The field work began with the Northern Territory Population Mobility Survey of 1,469 residents, administered by computer-aided telephone interviews (CATI) in September and October, 2006. The questions, apart from demographic ones, focussed on migration patterns and motivations for moving either to, or away from, the Northern Territory. While this is useful background information, it remains simply this.

The survey was followed by 73 in-depth interviews with people who were self-selected from the CATI survey, responded to advertisements, or were known to the research team. Since the researchers wanted to involve participants who had recently left the Northern Territory, recruitment also took place through the self-administered Australia Post Relocation Survey. Although there had been a desire to balance the sample for gender, various age groups, and length of residency, this proved difficult. The final sample included 46 women and 27 men, with ages ranging from twenty to 78 years and with length of residency varying from less than one year to more than 40 years. Only five interviewees had been born in the Northern Territory, with fifteen having been born overseas. Most experiences of participants centred on Darwin and Alice Springs, the second major town of the Northern Territory.

Interviews, lasting 45 to 50 minutes each, were conducted from October 2006 until mid-2007. Forty-one were conducted face-to-face and 32 by telephone. The face-to-face interviews took place in a variety of locations including participants' homes and public areas. Average interview length was around 50 minutes. Each interview was recorded, with the consent of the participant and in accordance with the requirements of the Charles Darwin University, using a digital voice recorder.

Although the semi-structured questions asked in the in-depth interviews were based on those of the CATI survey, there were follow-up questions which sometimes elicited responses useful to this article. The interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy before being entered into a qualitative data management system (NVivo 7).

In mid-2007, another component of qualitative data collection took place. The focus of this data collection, which was independent of the CATI survey, was social memory, including how information about Darwin was gathered. As mentioned above, the role of social memory and social information were considered important in the generation of feelings of belonging and for developing or sustaining a sense of place.

Because of the importance to Darwin residents of Mindil Beach, itself, as well as the regular markets held there during the dry season, the data collection took place at a Sunday afternoon/evening market in June. Three researchers approached people wandering around the market, as well as a few of the stall holders, and undertook a short interview with them, if they agreed that they were happy to do this. An attempt was made to interview a balance of males and females of various ages and a questionnaire was filled in with their responses. Questions focussed on demographic information as well as the frequency of, and reasons for, visits to the

market. A key purpose was to gain participants' agreement to be phoned for a longer interview and thirty responses, with this agreement, were obtained. These thirty participants included fifteen men and fifteen women, five of whom were aged 20-30, eight were 31-40, seven were 41-50, seven were 51-60 and three were 61-70. They had lived in the Northern Territory (almost all in Darwin) for between six months and 50+years (in the case of the one participant who was born in Darwin). Several of the longer-term residents had left, and returned, to the Northern Territory at least once during their period of residence.

Fifteen of these thirty Mindil Beach participants took part, with informed consent, in the longer telephone interviews (of about twenty minutes). The emphasis in the questions was on how participants learned about the past history of the Mindil Beach site, which has important historical links to Indigenous culture, as well as about Darwin and the Northern Territory. Another question, of relevance to this article, focussed on views and feelings about Darwin as a place.

The data analysis, given the small size of the sample, was done by hand, with themes and categories being developed from the data. Once themes and categories had been determined, voice sheets, so called because they record the "voices" of (or quotations from) participants, were set up for each theme. This is a way of grouping relevant quotes for later use in writing up the findings. The following is the voice sheet for the theme, "Learning about Darwin" but it includes just a few of the categories and quotations.

Table 1: Learning about Darwin voice sheet

Category	Quotations
Other people	… before I started reading a lot of books … I [was] just listening to people tell me stories.
Events, e.g.., Mindil Market, carnivals	At carnivals mostly. I go to all the carnivals and markets around Darwin.
Newspapers	I just particularly like the old pictures [in the newspapers] … The pictures of the buildings before they, what they are today.
Physical markers	I do read the plaques around … I've seen them around Darwin, but not around Mindil …

4. Findings

The findings from the project, overall, are voluminous. Included here is a selection that illustrates the role of social information in fostering a sense of community and belonging – and the converse of community and connectedness encouraging information exchange. As mentioned above, the questions concerning social information and social memory, asked in the Mindil Beach (MB) component, focussed firstly on how participants learned about Darwin, with a specific question being asked about physical markers. Data concerning how people felt about Darwin as a place to live, along with the push and pull factors (to and from Darwin) emerged from both the MB interviews and the larger qualitative data collection. These data gave some indication of the extent of "sense of belonging" of the interviewees involved. The findings emphasise the positives of the data, in other words those aspects that encouraged participants to feel "at home" in Darwin, regardless of the amount of time they had spent in the city.

4.1 How participants learned about Darwin

This was a key question in the MB data collection. As indicated in the outline of the analysis, above, there was a range of ways in which participants indicated that they had learned about Darwin. By far the most frequently mentioned source was "other people", in other terms, interpersonal information sources, where the information exchange sometimes took place in the context of special and regular events. Other sources were newspapers and physical markers. In the case of "physical markers", a specific question was asked of participants.

4.1.1 Interpersonal information sources and networks

Most participants in the MB component, who were asked specifically how they learned about Darwin, indicated that interpersonal sources were important. Needless to say, the participants from MB sometimes found their personal informants at the market itself:

> *Through the markets I socialise with a lot of the other stall holders. Mainly through oral history, other people telling us … at the market.* (MB participant)

In general, "other people" were the information source most frequently nominated by the MB participants:

> *I've got friends that are long-time residents here. … I like to listen to the old ones around Darwin.* (MB participant)
>
> *Yeah, I think they [local people] have been [significant in learning about Darwin], because that was all before I started reading a lot of books … I [was] just listening to people tell me stories.* (MB participant)

This emphasis on interpersonal sources of information is consistent with the findings of research over a considerable period of time, as discussed above (e.g., Chen & Hernon, 1982; Williamson, 1998; Heinstrom, 2002).

While participants in the larger qualitative study were not asked specifically about how they learned about Darwin, there were several mentions of local networks from which various participants received support and which had helped them to develop a sense of belonging:

> *Football or drinking at the club or work or whatever. Everybody's network is quite small in Darwin.* (Larger qualitative study participant)

> *I was part of the Young Professionals Network, which is a group of government and now private enterprise young people getting together and doing social events and networking.* (Larger qualitative study participant)

As mentioned above, there has been considerable earlier work, in the field of HIB, which has indicated that interaction with family and friends often results in the incidental exchange of information (e.g., P. Wilson, 1997, Chen & Hernon, 1982, Williamson, 1998).

4.1.2 Special and regular events

The role of special events, mentioned frequently by qualitative study participants of both types, is related to the points made, above, about the relationship between human interaction and incidental information exchange. Participants made comments about events as both a way of information exchange and as a way of fostering community participation. In terms of the former, there were comments from MB participants about events as an information source about Darwin.

> *At carnivals mostly [I learn about Darwin]. I go to all the carnivals and markets around Darwin.* (MB participant)

> *It's [Mindil Beach Markets] a big part of my social life [and informational network].* (MB participant)

In terms of the latter, both groups of qualitative participants made comments about the social networking attributes of events.

> *Government should keep funding [arts events] … that create a wonderful sense of community.* (MB participant)

[Community would be fostered] if they bring back the bougainvillea festival. ...That used to be absolutely fantastic. (Larger qualitative study participant)

4.1.3 Newspapers

When asked about how they had learned about Darwin, another source nominated by Mindil Beach participants was newspapers.

I just particularly like the old pictures [in the newspapers] ... The pictures of the buildings before they, what they are today. (MB participant)

I found out about Indigenous burial sites through the newspaper. (MB participant)

Again, the role of the mass media for ELIS is confirmed in the literature (P. Wilson 1977, Williamson 1998), with early uses and gratifications studies of information and the mass media having typically shown that users of print media are better informed than users of electronic media (Wade and Schramm, 1969; Warner, Murray and Palmour 1973).

4.1.4 Physical markers

On the one hand, not all of the MB participants were conscious of the many plaques and other physical markers around Darwin. For example, although born in Darwin, a young participant (20-30 age range) admitted to not knowing about the significance of Mindil Beach for Indigenous people, despite the prominently displayed memorial Tiwi oles that mark their association with that area. On the other hand, there were others who had noticed the physical markers and had learned from them:

I do read the plaques around ... I have seen them around Darwin, but not around Mindil. ... I have seen the poles there [that mark the Indigenous people's association with the area. (MB participant)

They've got hundreds of little plaques around everywhere in Darwin, of various importance to people. (MB participant)

The importance of information in the environment was emphasised by Moore (2002) because so much information is passively absorbed (Bates 2002).

4.2 Views and feelings about Darwin

There was a wide arrange of views about Darwin, including its weather, its built environment and its life style. Included here are a few views that relate to part of the focal argument of this article – that social networks, and the information generated from them, are crucial in generating positive perceptions of place.

> *We started to meet other young couples and once we got that social life happening, that turned things around for me. ... When you'd meet people you'd have so much to talk about because you were learning from their experiences. And I think that, once I started to get a bit of a taste for this, I thought I don't really want to go back [i.e, leave Darwin].* (Larger qualitative study participant)

> *Occasionally there are wondrous things that happen that could never happen anywhere else and make a difference. ... It is a place unlike anywhere else and I think that's a form of social cohesion as well, a bit of an 'us against the world' thing at times.* (MB participant)

> *We decided to have a family, then the benefits for us in staying is that our family and friend network is here.*

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article begins discussion of an area of HIB, not yet broached specifically in the literature, as far as can be ascertained. It has postulated that social information, connected to social networking, plays a role in developing and sustaining a sense of place or belonging. While the information-focussed questions in the Darwin project were limited, it was clear that word-of-mouth, particularly, but also information in the environment, e.g., physical markers, were important for new comers in learning about Darwin. It was also clear that social networks (including both strong and weak ties), known to foster information exchange, were important to the sense of belonging that at least some participants believed they enjoyed. Although Internet networks were not involved in this study, there is some comparability with research findings regarding online support groups and information in the medical field, as mentioned above.

Returning to the Moore (2002) framework, the findings of this project have indicated that the key source of information about Darwin was "other people" and that social networks, including both strong and weak ties as discussed by Granovetter (1973;1982), were important to participants in fostering their sense of belonging. This finding is in keeping with that of the Shoham and. Strauss (2008) study of absorption of Israeli immigrants where the role of family and friends was rated highly "as support and as important means of information". Newspapers and environmental information, e.g., physical markers also played a role.

Given these findings, the question that needs to be asked is: What can be done to enhance processes, already seen to work effectively for some residents, but probably not available to all? Is there a role for other "agents" or initiators of information (Moore's fourth dimension) and other ways to distribute social information about Darwin more widely (Moore's sixth dimension)?,

One answer seems to lie with the use of the "information grounds" concept, discussed above. For example, the Mindil Beach Market, held on a regular basis during the dry season, appears to be a natural information ground which could be used by information providers to distribute social information about Darwin to great effect. For example, the public library could run a stall at the market, with the two-fold purposes of distributing information and also promoting library services. This is in keeping with the suggestion of the originator of the "information grounds" concept, mentioned above, that substantial work is needed to ascertain "how they may be engineered to facilitate everyday information flow" (Fisher, Landry & Naumer 2007, n.p.). The special events for which Darwin is renowned (e.g., the various ethnic events and festivals) could be used in a similar way. As Savolainen (2009) pointed out, "the construct of

information grounds provides a novel viewpoint on spatial issues by identifying a wide variety of locales where everyday information seeking and sharing occurs" (np).

The empirical data, presented in this article, are limited but the authors believe that the concept of information playing a part in assisting people to develop and sustain a sense of place, or belonging, is worthy of further investigation. The role that information within online support groups for new, and even established residents, could also be a fruitful avenue for exploration.

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