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# The critical information literacy of social workers: Information literacy as interpersonal practice

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to contribute to a pragmatic understanding of critical information literacy (CIL) by positioning it as a context-specific interpersonal practice. Using phenomenography to explore how information work is experienced by social workers in social and health care settings, this paper provides an example of critical information practice that can be used to operationalise and activate CIL as a theory and inform approaches to critical pedagogy. CIL as a concept is generally theorised, practiced, and taught in academic contexts, and relatively few examples of how theory can be defined and put into practice outside a classroom setting are available. This study builds on our understanding of CIL by exploring professional information practice and suggests a model for teaching to engage learners in connecting information to action in social systems.

## Keywords

## 1. Introduction

Defined broadly, "critical information literacy (CIL) is a theory and practice that considers the sociopolitical dimensions of information and production of knowledge and critiques the ways in which systems of power shape the creation, distribution, and reception of information." (Drabinski & Tewell, 2019, p. 1). It is an approach to information literacy (IL) that "takes into consideration the social, political, economic, and corporate systems that have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption" (Gregory & Higgins, 2013, p. 4). CIL has been conceptualised and applied in academic contexts to inform critical library pedagogy and practice, but fewer definitions of the concept explicitly address the role that communities and environments outside academia have in developing CIL among learners. Luke and Kapitzke's (1999, pp. 483-484) definition of CIL centres on "the social construction and cultural authority of knowledge; the political economies of knowledge ownership and control; and the development of local communities' and cultures' capacities to critique and construct knowledge". Swanson (2005, p. 67) emphasises the importance of practice and offers a description of CIL that "views information as a social construct that is created by a human being for a particular use, [and] emphasizes that information literacy is meaningless without purpose and action," and in doing so connects IL to social justice. Exploring the practice and purpose of CIL in different settings can provide evidence of people's context-specific experiences of information, stretching definitions of CIL and unpacking the concepts of "reception" or "consumption" that are part of many of those definitions.

Tuominen, Savolainen and Talja (2005, p. 341) argue that "if we see the learners of information skills as belonging to information literate communities, we need to understand the practices of these communities before we can effectively teach IL". The approach to understanding IL that they describe "calls for empirical research efforts to analyze how specific communities use various conceptual, cultural, and technical tools [...] to evaluate and create knowledge." (pp. 341-342). This study responds to that call and explores how a professional community of social

workers evaluates information sources, tools, and opportunities for use in their practice, and how doing so demonstrates CIL. Further, it explores how the CIL of helping professionals is defined and developed through relationships with their clients in their role as information providers, mediators, and facilitators. Describing information practice as a social practice with "a focus on interpersonal practices rather than on behavior" illustrates how IL is "collaboratively negotiated and constructed" (McKenzie, 2004, p. 685), and allows us to see the construction of this literacy through specific outcome-based and social justice-informed social work practice. Tewell (2015) states that CIL "encourages librarians to develop an information literacy theory and practice that recognizes students' personal agency and attempts to create positive personal and social change" (p. 26). This study presents a theory *of* practice that supports these attempts and articulates CIL's significance for students and future professionals in spaces beyond academia, offering a "measurable dimension" to critical IL (Spiranec, Zorica & Kos, 2016, p. 248) that may help librarians communicate what "doing" IL looks like in practice to advocate for critical library instruction for students in professional programs.

## 2. Conceptualising critical information literacy in practice

In teaching practice, many academic librarians have addressed both the purpose and action of CIL (Accardi, Drabinski & Kumbier, 2010; Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016), although evidence of action has so far been limited to classroom situations in academic settings and not yet in broader systems or contexts. Fountain's (2013) case study is one of few examples of research on CIL in action that shows its potential to inform pedagogy. She demonstrated how evidence from workplace information practices could be applied to CIL instruction that engages students with information beyond the university. Despite this gap in the literature, the value in studying CIL outside academia, and its relevance to teaching, is made clear by Whitworth (2016, p. 66), who states that literacy is "an intrinsically collective, intersubjective phenomenon, and one that is specific to particular contexts." He argues that workplace learning, and the practice of IL, are performed by people in a social site whose actions are constrained by how information and information sources are enabled to function within that site.

Whitworth's discussion of CIL in workplaces is situated in the sizable literature on workplace IL grounded in socio-cultural understandings of information practice and behaviour. In numerous studies set in various professional practice settings, scholars have demonstrated convincingly that IL is a practice and an experience that is developed socially and relationally in contexts shaped by social, cultural, political, and economic conditions. This research takes a very broad definition of IL as a starting point, and provides rich, nuanced descriptions of what people actually do with information in practice, demonstrating that IL is lived and experienced in "people, practices, and process" (Elmborg, 2012, p. 78), perhaps developed and grown in learners but not an "autonomous entity" (Hicks & Lloyd, 2022) to master or become expert in is significant for CIL pedagogy. Qualitative studies of the information practices of health and human service professionals, including nurses, midwives, and social workers, have highlighted the sociocultural context of health IL (Bonner & Lloyd, 2011; Buchanan, Jardine & Ruthven, 2017; Cagle and Kovasc, 2009; Eckerdal, 2011; McKenzie, 2004; Sabelli, 2016). Through various theoretical and methodological approaches scholars have examined the role that these professionals play in the development of IL in care or service environments. Researchers of these professional information contexts argue that learning about information is necessarily situated, social, and undertaken with particular uses and purposes. Tuominen, Savolainen and Talja (2005, pp. 330-331) connect the need for a "situated understanding of learning" to the ways librarians instruct future professionals for information practice after graduation, arguing that "information competencies cannot be taught "for life" independent of the practical domains and tasks in which they are used and that usually involve a complex system of social relationships and work organization".

A significant challenge for any approach to IL instruction is to meaningfully and impactfully integrate IL into disciplinary ways of knowing, cultures, and practices (Hicks, 2013). More evidence is needed that can help demonstrate the contextual relevance of critical IL to integrate it not only into disciplinary discourses but specifically into professional practice discourses, especially for students in professional programs. The social justice focus of CIL research and practice offers ways to apply the theories of situated, social and contextually relevant IL from workplace studies to critical library instruction and offers a new layer to understanding the nature of IL in everyday life and work. Hicks (2022) argues that Library and Information Science (LIS) research has much to offer health literacy research and suggests that the "sociocultural turn" in both disciplinary discourses provides a beneficial point for connection and extension of research, to "help to extend understanding about how people interact with information within health contexts." (abstract). Hicks' arguments for integration of LIS research into health contexts apply equally well to social care contexts, where critical social work practice aligns with CIL in its recognition that this practice is shaped by "social structures, relations of power, and identity" (Healy, 2022, p. 211). There are benefits to exploring how LIS approaches might also inform studies of complex information systems and environments where learners may find themselves on either side of the care relationships that create meaning with information in context. Building on the research in both LIS and health and social care fields, this study applies a critical IL lens to a qualitative exploration of professional information practice in social service settings to generate new insights for understanding this practice that could support critical pedagogy for future professionals.

## 3. Methodology

Phenomenography has been applied in LIS research to provide rich descriptions of IL as it is experienced in diverse contexts (Bruce, 1999; Diehm & Lupton, 2012; Forster, 2016; Yates et al., 2012). It has also been applied in social work research to explore how practitioners experience evidence-based practice (Avby, Nilsen & Dahlgren, 2014) and how students experience development of digital literacy (Taylor-Beswick, 2022). It is a methodology that reveals variation in the ways that groups of people perceive, experience, or understand a phenomenon (Given, 2008), focusing on the "relation between people and their world" (Bruce, 1999, p. 10). Through analysis of semi-structured interview data, researchers develop categories of description that show qualitative variation in experience, as well as the relationships between those categories (Forster, 2016). When IL is seen as a phenomenon that is experienced, rather than a defined set of skills that are performed, examining people's experiences of this phenomenon can provide deeper understanding of how people experience IL and of the phenomenon itself, which in turn can have implications for IL instruction (Limberg, 2009). In this study, phenomenography provides a way of unravelling various dimensions of social workers' experiences of CIL, revealing distinct aspects of IL as action.

### 3.1 Methods, participants and setting

A qualitative survey and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a convenience sample consisting of members of the Ontario Association of Social Workers who responded to a request to participate via their professional association mailing list. The researcher obtained Human Research Ethics clearance from their institution. 40 survey responses were collected (see Appendix A) and eleven interviews were conducted (see Appendix B). Interviews were conducted via telephone or video conference and lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. Participants worked in a variety of settings, including hospitals, government service centres, community agencies, and private counselling practice, and all worked directly with service users. They had a range of job functions and had spent from one year to more than 15 years in the field. Most participants had Master of Social Work degrees, and a few had Bachelor of Social work degrees.

Applying phenomenographic principles of data collection and analysis, the researcher designed interview questions to be open to all possible meanings that might be described by participants, to allow respondents to choose their own interpretation of IL, and to encourage them to richly describe their experiences with concrete examples (Akerlind, 2005; Bruce, 1997). Categories of description were established through several iterations of reading interview transcripts and grouping concepts that emerged from participants' descriptions; the categories are empirically and logically derived "compositions, formed out of an aggregate of similar perceptions" among the participants (Barnacle, 2005, p. 50) representing qualitatively different ways of experiencing CIL that are connected in a logical, structural manner (Akerlind, 2005; Bruce, 1997).

# 4. Categories of critical information practice

Analysis of the survey responses and interview transcripts revealed four interrelated categories of experience. In addition to block quotes, italics are used below to highlight participants' words that exemplify aspects of these categories. While there is a hierarchical relationship among categories (for example, negotiating builds on the work of validating, and locating synthesises the first three categories) they are manifest simultaneously in the social workers' experiences of CIL, not sequential steps in a process of becoming or learning.

**Validating** - evaluating information sources with a client-focused lens, focusing on client needs, desires, and jointly established outcomes.

**Negotiating** - working out, compromising on, and establishing the real value, usefulness, and impact of the information if and when it is used for a client outcome.

**Navigating** - applying search skills to pursuing the negotiated course of action, and seeking, accessing, and using information in the context of the social and health care system.

**Locating** - applying understanding of their location within the structures of power in the system and how their position/perspective as social workers impacts their information practices, and the outcomes of those practices, as they negotiate and navigate in the system.

## 4.1 Validating

The words participants used to describe their evaluation practices illustrate how their approaches were rooted in their relationship-based work with clients. Information sources were validated with the client's needs, capabilities, and desires in mind; not by inherent qualities or characteristics of the information itself, but how accessible, available, valuable (and conversely, how potentially negative) it was to clients. The value, credibility, accuracy, and authority that the social workers assigned to information sources was always relative to the needs of their clients and measured against what they knew to be true from their experiences in the field. This validation work was performed primarily for online information sources sought for, and often with, their clients to find, access, register for, or learn about programs and services related to the issues they were experiencing.

The social workers had strong opinions about information on the Web that their clients were finding and trying to use. They assessed websites' consistency, sustainability, accessibility, and accuracy, and commented not only on the content of websites, but on how the information was presented in terms of relatability for clients, privileged or biased language, and truthfulness. They mentioned *complex and convoluted* government websites that are difficult to read, websites that misrepresent what agencies and organizations do, *unexplained processes* that websites often gloss over or omit, and information presented in ways that *do not reflect the relationship that is so necessary to engage people*.

> But then you know, websites, I find them to be… They're really good, really attractive, but then also some of them can be wordy and some of them … can be a little inflammatory in terms of, you know, they promise the moon and promise an ideal, which is what they're supposed to do it promise an ideal. But then the delivery, the gap is very different.

They validated information based on their experiences in the field, relationships with clients, and their training as social workers, applying *insider knowledge* and speaking of the value to clients in *having a person to walk with you in understanding what's out there.* Often, they assessed these sources with their clients, teaching them how and why to evaluate websites as they search for information themselves. They also worked to validate information for their clients by translating, contextualising, or interpreting it to aid comprehension of content and purpose.

> Even when it's social care treatment, like food, security, or after school programming or whatever, we spend a good amount of time educating patients on why a resource might be useful to them, and because it's part of informed consent to be referred to the program, to be like "here's this program, here's why, you know, I think it might be a good fit for you. Here's some of the evidence that supports that, are you comfortable with the referral? Here's how your information will be used. And would you like to be referred?" For me, at least it's part of the informed consent process for them to understand why I'm considering this as a resource for this patient.

Another key aspect of their work was recognising how and why information exists and operates in the social care system, and how these factors could influence their assessment of information. They recognised that the social, political, and economic context in which they worked often made information unstable, inaccurate or unusable, due to funding volatility which impacts how long agencies and services can operate, how they are staffed, how they are managed, and what kind of oversight or accountability there is for the information they produce.

> The political part of me, you know, with organizations hiring from part-time workers and pretty much eliminating full-time workers, I'm watching so much of a turnaround over the last number of years, so catching up to the agencies is hard because I can't talk to the same person. And then I think services get harder to articulate and harder to understand, and harder I think for the agencies to articulate. And I think that kind of thing hurts the relationship between the public and those services and it makes it more confusing and bureaucracy is increased. … So I worry that clients hear and read one thing and they experience something different.

Because the information they found on websites was frequently out of date, inaccurate, or untrustworthy, it was rarely taken at face value and was regularly validated or fact checked with another source, which was almost always a human. This aligns with previous studies (Flanagan, 2020) of social workers' information behavior that have found that interpersonal communication is the dominant mode of information seeking for case-related information work. Colleagues with experience in the field were described as the most valuable information sources, and almost all the social workers mentioned confirming their understanding or checking accuracy of information with colleagues. This validation work was done to get clients connected with services and programs that would be most appropriate and helpful for them. However, even when the information on websites was evaluated and deemed useful or appropriate, or applicable by the social worker, there was additional work to be done with clients before the information could be used.

## 4.2 Negotiating

The value of information sources was negotiated with clients, through dialogue about what clients wanted and needed. A detailed psychosocial assessment was often involved, considering all aspects of the client's situation and needs, *identifying their strengths and coping capacities, assessing their informal network of support*. Often, this work was done for the purpose of setting up clients for success in the search for information, whether the client did this themselves, with help from a social worker, or by a social worker on their behalf.

In this practice they applied their understanding of client needs and capabilities and shifted their evaluation from the information itself to how it could be used. At the heart of this practice was the awareness that client experiences are shaped by their experiences of oppression, and by their past, current, and future experience with information in the system.

> I can recall a few experiences where -- and this is why sometimes it's so disheartening when I hear from my clients -- when they're coming to me, they have exhausted every option that they could. So coming to me, it's almost like their last resource of hope, and they're not even too sure whether I'm gonna help them because they said, "what makes you different from the other person?" So there's also this barrier that they're feeling like, you know, "I've met a lot of service providers who repeated the same thing, and I haven't seen any of that materialize." ... And then feeling like they're not being heard, and then feeling like they're just repeating their stories over and over again.

Many of them described the systemic challenges clients faced in getting to the information they needed or were expected to use, such as *lack of access to technology, lack of access to internet [and] limited transportation to get to places to help them with the information.* Participants also described the personal barriers that their clients faced in finding, accessing, and using information sources that highlighted the conflicts and challenges they had to negotiate with those clients: *feelings of powerlessness, lack of access at times, lack of trust in information and some government services*, experiencing crisis situations, and mental health barriers. Social workers had to negotiate around clients' various abilities and levels of willingness to find, access and apply information to address their needs or to help them progress through the system.

They also negotiated information use in the context of a health and social care system where their clients could be variously "positioned with respect to the information, its producers, and those providing mediation," (Wathen, Harris and Wyatt, 2008, p. 185) be it social workers or other professionals. They spoke about information provision and use being interactive and relational, and how a significant part of this practice was being mindful of client choice, control, and authority in terms of how, when and what to seek for information.

> I think a lot of times what I'm doing is assisting people to get to a place where they can decide whether or not they're looking for additional information and if they are, what type, what might be helpful to them. And there are some instances where I'm a bit more proactive about recommending or suggesting things and there are other instances where I'm relying on my client to say, "I really have a need for information about this." And I think that the way that I then look for information is really informed by what clients are telling me.

Negotiating also means knowing when, if and how info can and will be used, and knowing when more or different information may not be appropriate. The client's experience with information was important to them and setting up their clients for a positive experience meant asking questions and making decisions about the impact of referring or providing a resource.

Sometimes it's letting them know what is available. What does it actually look like to access these services in regard to the system? Letting them know timelines, letting them know the forms, helping to translate some of the language or the acronyms that are in the forms. Talking about what different professionals do, right? … Doing a lot of coaching around what the different roles are, what the opportunities are, what the timeline looks like, giving them information about the information that we collect, right? What do we write down? What reports go to what individuals, who has access to their information, which is something that I'm not sure everyone necessarily even has an understanding of when we're there gathering this information.

Social workers stated various considerations in deciding when and how to provide information. One of these was being aware of that window, where they are receptive or even recognising … if they're in crisis mode and outside of their window of tolerance, being able to interpret and understand that information is challenging. No one spoke of disregarding or denying what their clients expressed in terms of information needs; they were clear that their clients decided when and what information to seek. However, some of them did indicate struggling with having to recommend or provide access to services and programs based on what was financially, geographically, or legally available rather than what was the most evidence-based or best suited to their client. This related to their inability or unwillingness to rely on poor quality online information.

Sometimes you know, when you work in a smaller region, you get what you get. So sometimes what I'm referring to is just what exists, not necessarily what's evidence based or evidence informed. But definitely the direction is like, we only want folks using services that we deem as ethical. So, if it's a private service for example, and I don't really know what they're doing over there, I would say that to a patient, "well there's this private service but honestly, I don't know what they're doing over there so I can't wholeheartedly recommend it."

Related to this was the time available and priority they, and their organizations, assigned to searching for information, or building resource lists and contacts. A few participants remarked that information seeking and evaluation took precious time away from clinical, face-to-face work with clients and was difficult to do when they were face to face with those clients, trying to listen attentively and search for information at the same time.

Participants commented on the challenges of negotiating with clients and recognised that for many reasons, their work would not result in enhancing or developing IL in their clients. According to one, *some clients have limited motivation to undergo their own 'research/ inquiry' and can become complacent with others doing their work.* Through negotiation, they recognised the limits experienced by their clients in the social care information landscape and the extent of their abilities to help clients seek, access, and apply information to get their needs met.

When some of my clients are meeting me or speaking with me for the first time, they are experiencing some distress that's affecting their ability or their willingness to look for information. They're experiencing a moment where they may require assistance first to cope with that distress in order to be able to look for information, process it, understand what might be relevant for them and to make decisions. ... It can be hard to discern sometimes what is useful to that specific client in that moment for their experience.

As the social workers negotiated how, when, and why to use information, they were constrained by both their client's current situation and the affordances and limits of the larger information environment they were working in (Bjork, 2019). In this context of multiple constraints, they made decisions based on what information was available, familiar, and expedient (Flanagan,

2020), and in doing so, they revealed the relational and interpersonal foundations of their system navigation work.

## 4.3 Navigating

One of the participants described this work as *establishing [the] clearest path to information*, a practice that was not usually straightforward, and not always the desired path. The challenges that they described included the nature of the information sources available, the amount of information to read and assess with limited time, the need to make quick decisions, and the unknown quantity and quality of information that was available.

Social workers navigated both online environments and real-life environments. With online information, they expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with how the organization and accessibility of that information made their work difficult. *At times*, one participant stated, *it is difficult to navigate the overload of information on the internet. For example, housing applications can be in different websites, the mix of resources that use different platforms, choosing best options from what can feel like an unknown certainty of options.* The landscape that they described navigating was a *confusing array of discrete resources or programs* often presented on websites that were not up to date, accurate, or easily accessible. One participant stated, *unless I know ahead of time that a service or resource exists, it can be difficult to find*. They mentioned navigating around blind spots or holes in the system, describing *out of date or non existing online resources,* lack of free or low-cost programs and resources, and lack of services for specific populations. Some of the navigation challenges crossed over from the virtual to the real environment. When they spoke about the in-person environment, they also expressed frustrations and disappointment, and were critical of how the system's design shaped and limited their work with clients. However, their comments also suggested that they felt able and more prepared to challenge and address some of the roadblocks they faced in the complicated information system they were navigating.

> I think in general the systems… are so complicated both to health systems and the social service systems. So not having someone who has some acumen and expertise and honestly, like business-to-business relationships with other folks, is really, really difficult for anybody in crisis or otherwise or who's having, you know, any sort of health or social need, that requires some sort of system navigation and connection.

When describing how they addressed navigation challenges, they spoke with confidence about using interpersonal skills, professional knowledge and experience to perform specific actions in the structures they were navigating, using phrases like poking holes, tapping in, plugging in, cracking open and stretching.

> And in sharing that [information], opening those doors for conversation and from that, then bringing other layers of knowledge brokering to the table with respect to the services that could be provided... And you know, there's those extra layers of complication and technically my arm can only reach so far, but you stretch it, right? And information is easy to stretch in that regard. You know, because you can provide that information, you can provide the links for resources, you can, you know, pull in colleagues and gather that data and support services. So I think sharing that information is really kind of that highway to service provision and it's a highway to ensuring quality of life and ensuring that people are informed to the best of my abilities to inform them.

Navigating the system was strategic exploration and was fundamental to their work with clients. Their search for *collateral information*, like home situation, community supports, or eligibility for services, to help identify and assess their clients' needs and the best ways of addressing those needs, was key. Their ability to navigate, to recognise roadblocks, barriers, and crucially, the

openings in those barriers through which they could help clients chart a course to assistance, was a key aspect of their critical information practice. This navigation was described as "the heavy leg work" that took more effort, time and skill than looking at "empirical work" or research evidence to determine an intervention approach.

> With older kids, I am starting to name things like, you know, this is the language you use to get support. For example, like out here we have really good care in some areas of mental health, really garbage care in other areas. It's like you know, "you have this diagnosis, so focus on that because there's good care there and then, you can also get help for your other diagnosis." So, teaching them the nuances of the system.

Social workers articulated the significance of their navigation work beyond simply getting information to meet their clients' immediate needs. They used their navigation skills to advocate for their clients and for social justice generally. One participant stated that *knowing where to go, knowing what's available, knowing who to ask, it's pretty vital, in terms of those social determinants of health*. Another spoke about the healthcare inequities that result from central intake systems that do not allow people to contact agencies directly and benefit from information intermediaries like social workers. Nearly every participant spoke of the difficulty in navigating the system, and the impact on care outcomes of an inability to navigate successfully.

> It's challenging because even for me as a professional there's a lot of loopholes and circles I have to go around just to find that service for them. So when I am connecting with them and they're telling me that they've done everything they can on their part to find services but they're just hitting roadblocks and they don't know how to advocate for themselves, they don't know what to look for, what's out in the community, I can understand that perspective because even from a professional [perspective], [there are] challenges trying to get those resources for them.

Their comments also suggested that they understood that the system itself posed significant roadblocks and challenges for their clients. In contrast to negotiating, where the client's context and system issues influenced decisions to use information to similar extents, navigating required a more critical and sometimes oppositional or subversive stance towards issues they recognised in the system, in order to use information to advocate for their clients. As they described their navigating in this way, they revealed an understanding of their relative and dynamic relationships to information, their clients, and other professionals in the system.

## 4.4 Locating

McKenzie's (2004) study of midwifery settings found that participants in a care setting "position themselves and one another in ways that justify different forms of information seeking and giving" (abstract). The social workers in this study similarly saw, used, and experienced information from the perspective of their social and professional location in the system in relation to their clients, and they described their information practices as social workers distinct from the practices of other professionals they worked with.

Like the healthcare providers studied by Wyatt, Harris and Wather (2008) the professional identities of these social workers were important in shaping how they created, shared, and used information in particular situations. The social workers clearly applied professional values and ethics to their information work, evidenced in how they positioned themselves not simply as information providers but as guides and counsellors for information seeking and use, honouring their clients' autonomy. This respect for clients' autonomy and agency was a significant theme in the social workers' responses and guided their approaches to information work with clients. The social work lens they applied to their information work set them apart from other

professionals they worked with, particularly in terms of their expectations and assumptions about the outcomes of information use.

> The relational approach is listening… I can't tell you how many times physicians would say to me, "but I gave them that information." But without the relational piece, people are less likely to follow through. And there needs to be a follow-up to see. Did they connect? And if not, what were the barriers, and that's not like taking up the homework. That's, let's understand if we need to break it down into smaller steps so it's not punitive.

Participants described their work as part of interprofessional teams within organizations and in larger health and social care systems and noted that their unique social work position towards "compliance and self-determination" was different from other health professionals they worked with (Bella, Harris, Chavez et al., 2008, p. 34). Their comments on the information work that they and their colleagues performed revealed a recognition of the power that information sources have when used by different professionals, and how different professionals understand and value those information sources.

> I think [the unique social work approach] is that invitation. Giving invitations for clients to access information. In one of my roles I work within a medical team. … I would give more invitations to the clients to take next steps whereas the other healthcare professionals are more doing prescriptive work, where there's "do this, take this, follow up on this." … So it's, I guess, a difference in approaches. But I think that relational approach, some people are more receptive to that. … So if I can do anything to try to give people choice, that's what's really important in my work. … People have a lot of internal wisdom and resiliency, and they know what's best for them and what choices to make. And if they won't call a phone number or don't, then they know what they need to do.

Information itself was not necessarily central in their interactions with clients; using information successfully and productively was often one of the outcomes they were working towards, but they also recognised that information could in fact be a barrier to helping their clients, and it if did not serve an immediate need or if it had a potential negative impact on the client, it was not provided. They saw that information in itself is not always a solution for many marginalised clients, but instead could be a tool of the systems and structures that oppressed and marginalised them.

They did not view themselves as information 'experts' or compare themselves to 'novice' information seeking clients. They did not see a lack of IL in their clients and did not describe themselves as having superior or expert information skills, but instead saw their own privileged educational status, experience, and the ability to make connections with people as factors in their successful information work. One participant explained, *I always use the statement that 'you are an expert of your life, and I'm just only a facilitator here to help you to find your answers. Because I know that you know your answers yourself, but maybe there's some blockers in the road that you cannot see your answer, or you cannot achieve your goal along the way.'* Another participant explicitly stated they did not consider themself an information expert and did not position themself as such with clients.

> I might provide information and it might not be something that my patient wants to accept even though it is needed. I think a good knowledge of my own biases and my own position of power, which is inevitable in my role, there is this power imbalance for sure. I am not always the expert. I am not an expert. I know where to find information. Having good active listening skills is important. Operating through a strengths-based lens and helping, looking at the strengths that someone has in coping, in reaching out for information rather than looking at what they're unable to do. ... And it is a

> collaborative intervention ... I can offer information and support, but I can't forcefully persuade anyone to accept it.

Participants saw their social work role in context of the system and their clients' experiences with that system -- they recognised that their actions impacted clients directly through the information they create, share, select, and apply to their client's situation.

> If [the clients] are not well resourced, or if there's these barriers, or if [the information is] not geared to reflect the privilege level that they may have, it's almost like they're being set up to fail. They're almost being set up to continue having a reliance on the system.

Overall, they positioned their information work in a way that was distinct from other care professionals they worked with, and unique in its focus on their clients' experiences. Although most of them did not speak highly of their own expertise with information, their reflections on systemic power structures and the way they negotiated and navigated those structures positioned them as critically information literate professionals in the contexts of the health and social care system, their local communities, their workplaces, and their direct practice with clients. These social workers demonstrated CIL by disputing the neutrality of the system of services, programs, agencies in which they work, and being self-reflexive of their and their clients' positions in the power structures of that system.

## 5. Discussion

The interrelated practices of validating, negotiating, navigating, and locating together comprise a model of critical information practice derived from the information experiences of social workers. These experiences were informed by professional values and ethics; structured by the social workers' position at the intersection of both individual and system-wide needs and constraints; and shaped by their creative and critically reflective work to serve the IL needs of others, underlining the social/dialogic aspect of this model.

In the ways they described validating information sources, negotiating and navigating their use of information in their workplaces, and locating themselves and their clients relative to the information available to them, it was clear that social workers were critically aware of the social and political forces impacting information production, administration, and use in their practice environments and thus demonstrated CIL. They empathised with their clients' inability to access and use information from government agencies and service providers that presumed and required things like internet access, information technology skills, English language skills, and functional mental health status. They were frustrated by seeing information that they knew to be incomplete, inaccurate, or misleading and knowing the impact this information had on their clients. Through experience, they learned to assess and creatively use information in the complicated health and social care systems, often using professional skills and personal relationships to circumvent, stretch, or reinterpret information from sources that would seem authoritative and immutable to their clients and other system users. They used information in ways that attempted to transfer some power from the system, through them, to their clients.

Revealing these dimensions of practice shows the significance of context in people's experience of CIL and shifts the focus from individual learners' knowledge and understanding about information to the "purpose and action" (Swanson, 2005, p. 67) of this understanding. The social workers in this study described their work almost exclusively in terms of client outcomes. Their IL practice was directed outward, not applied to their individual skills or knowledge. It was also specific. They spoke about client empowerment as one of the goals of their information work, but that empowerment was rooted in context, often with specific definable and immediate goals (e.g. referral to a service, discharge from care, or settlement of an insurance claim). Their experiences were dissimilar to academic environments where IL outcomes predominantly apply

to a "learner's own personal academic context or situation" and instruction on evaluation skills "centre on determining how information is fit for purpose within a specific context" (Hicks & Lloyd, 2022, pp. 6-7) but don't instruct students what to do with that determination. In the experience of these social workers, information could "fit" various purposes but ability to use it depended on the outcome of negotiating client needs and navigating the boundaries of their professional practice.

The workplace settings described by participants offer a new view of how CIL can be experienced and enacted. For example, evaluation is a practice that has specific meaning in academic contexts, often based on deep reading of the characteristics of an information source alone. However, of the four dimensions of practicing CIL, the 'validate' category is the only one where social workers foregrounded information sources themselves. The participants revealed a very social and contextual relationship to and experience with information, in which information is a significant presence in the bureaucratic systems of care, but not always at the centre of their vision and not always positive, helpful, or wanted. They had to work with information but did not always have the option to reject a source if it did not meet academic standards for quality or authority because nothing else was available, applicable, or authorised for use with their clients. In this practice environment, information sources exist and are evaluated as part of a larger system that limits the possible outcomes and purposes of information evaluation. The need to understand context in order to understand an information source for both professionals and service users was illustrated by one health social worker:

> There's a lot of silos within healthcare. And when you come with a diagnosis or a diagnostic label, sometimes those silos become barriers to access information. And so often it's an advocacy role too, with respect to, you know, trying to explain the systems barriers that these people are experiencing so that it's acknowledging their disempowerment, but also acknowledging that it's not a personal issue per se, that it is a systems issue… You know, when we're talking about mental health and physical health, there's such a disconnect and so it's sometimes explaining processes so that they can be empowered in that way of understanding the process that would then open doors for appreciating information on a resource-based level.

This evidence suggests that there is a need for IL pedagogy to shift its current emphasis from teaching students to critically assess the context of information *creation* to critically assess the context of *use*. Helping learners to position information's role in specific social settings instead of teaching them to expect a direct and rational interaction with information sources can encourage students to think critically about how information can be used, not just how it is created.

The critical information practice described by these social workers also suggests that outside of standards- and outcomes-based educational environments, people do not experience a division between expert and novice information literate individuals. They described a practice environment shaped by the nature of bureaucratic information systems, where information seeking, evaluation and use differed only by people's history, social location, education and level of privilege or exclusion. They understood that they, and many of their clients, could not and should not be expected to be experts, due to the varied relationships they had with information in the context of this system. Thus, their view of IL was "contextual and collective" (Hicks, 2018). Their comments reveal a professional skepticism and critical stance towards information, especially documentary information. This critical position meant understanding that information may not always be helpful, positive, or empowering for them or their clients (Sharun, 2019) and that they all had power to refuse or contest it. Seeing how critical literacy is experienced like this in social circumstances may help us overcome "the notion that IL is an educational obstacle that can be conquered" (Tewell, 2015, p. 25) and see that IL is a privilege

not attainable by everyone and a condition that does not necessarily lead to empowerment, even among the most engaged and willing learners, in contexts beyond academia.

Through the variety of ways that these social workers practiced CIL, they provide evidence for a model for critical information practice and point to ways that we can support learners by communicating a strengths-based, contextual, and relational definition of IL when working with students and faculty. With such an approach, we can prepare students for recognising and intentionally developing the system knowledge, personal networks, and critical stance towards information that practitioners develop over time and through experience. More significantly, this approach to IL instruction can help students move past the idea of IL as an individually attained academic skill and instead locate themselves in a professional information system not as experts but as collaborators and facilitators of IL.

## 6. Conclusion

The four dimensions of CIP described here offer a model for IL instruction that can be adapted to post-secondary students in several pre-professional programs. It has potential to assist educators' efforts to develop students' capacity for questioning of dominant social values and "common sense notions of society" (Cope, 2010, pp.19-21) by helping students relate these questioning practices to specific contexts and communities in which they are preparing to live and work.

The limitations of this study are the small number of participants, the distinct geographic location of those participants and the limited number of workplace contexts described. Nonetheless, it may serve as a pattern for similar work in other disciplines that builds on the theory of practice presented here and leads to the theorising of other models of IL in practice, contributing to the discussion of CIL beyond academia. The social workers who participated in this study provided evidence of ways that critical social work practice may potentially inform and shape CIL; further exploration of the connections between these two types of critical practice could be beneficial for both disciplines. As Dali (2018) has argued, learning more from the theory, practice and pedagogy of social work would benefit LIS professionals by helping them "develop into true change agents" (p.114). For example, social work theories can help librarians reconsider the notion of empowerment, a term contested in LIS discourse but still largely seen in a positive -- and positivist -- light (Hicks & Lloyd, 2021; Maack, 1997). Future work should investigate places where ideas of empowerment converge and diverge in social work and LIS discourses, and what this could mean for critical IL instruction, especially approaches to pedagogy, communication with disciplinary faculty, and integration into curriculum (Johnson, Bausman & Ward, 2021).

Many of the examples from the literature on critical library pedagogy are specific to academic research assignments in various disciplines (Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016); what seems to be missing are examples of context-specific critical literacy relevant to the specific "epistemic communities and work practices" (Tuominen et al., 2005, p. 340) of workplaces or professions of which students are or will be members. Seeking evidence of CIL in these professional practices to find evidence of strengths in practice can provide examples that are relevant to students' lived experiences. This can support the pedagogical approaches CIL scholars and educators have advocated for, which also include decentring librarians as experts, using practice-based and problem-based learning, and valuing learner experience with a strengths-based approach (McDonough, 2014). Examples of literacy as practice can help incorporate CIL concepts into pedagogy, allowing educators to teach critical *doing* as well as critical thinking and provide examples of social behaviours, practices and experiences that make IL more concrete to learners.

Elmborg (2012) argues "[c]ritical information literacy exists in relationships between people and information rather than as an identifiable thing in its own right" (p. 77). This study provides an example of a context-specific critical information practice that helps illuminate how that critical literacy exists and is experienced through professional relationships, adding a new layer to our definition of CIL, and contributing to more nuanced understanding that can help communicate CIL outside of librarianship. More specifically, this example contributes to the alignment of CIL with social justice and social work practice by illustrating the everyday implications of information practice that can shift discussions out of the "ivory tower" of academia, where the politics of information creation and use are important but in many ways removed from the experience of most people, especially those without the privilege of a university education who will be among our students' future clients, coworkers, and community members.

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## Appendix A: Survey

1. What is your level of education?
2. How long have you been working in the social services/ human services field?
3. What is your current role?
4. In what type of organization or agency do you currently work?
5. Please describe the clients or population you currently work with.
6. What types of information do your clients need?
7. Describe how you help clients with their information needs (e.g. assessing or evaluating information, using technology to access information, interpreting information etc.). Please provide an example if possible.
8. What challenges do your clients experience that impact their ability to find, access and effectively use information resources? (e.g. low literacy, lack of access to computers, mental health, information overload, etc.)
9. What kinds of challenges do you face in finding, accessing, evaluating and/or using information sources to do your job? Please explain and provide an example if possible.
10. What skills and knowledge do you use for your work connecting your clients to information sources? Where and how did you learn these skills and knowledge?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience helping clients with their information needs?

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

1. Research has shown that folks who are disadvantaged have trouble accessing and using information sources and technology to help meet their needs, and they are unlikely to use this information without human intermediaries to help them. What is your experience with playing this intermediary or navigator role? What is your experience helping people find, access, and use information?
2. How does this work relate to your professional roles and responsibilities? How important is your information provision role for your clients?
3. How prepared do you feel to help your clients in this way?
4. Generally speaking, do you think your clients could find, access and use these information sources without your help? Please explain.
5. How do you evaluate and select the information source you use for yourself and your clients?
6. Describe how you see your clients managing or using the information they acquire through their participation in your services and programs.
7. What do you see as an effective information encounter with a client? Provide an example if possible.
8. How do your relationships with clients impact your work as an information mediary or broker?
9. How do your professional values and ethics apply to your work as an information mediary?

10. Can you think of anything from your formal education that has helped with this kind of information work?
11. Do you think professional development opportunities on this topic would be helpful? If so, what should those opportunities look like?