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Many kinds of workers need to both work and learn in socially-isolated circumstances (i.e., in the absence of others who can provide guidance and support). Such circumstances require particular kinds of agency and agentic action by these worker-learners, and they might be described as requiring particularly agentic personal epistemologies. These epistemologies are essential for workers such as home care workers (HCWs), who after a perfunctory classroom training, are expected to work alone in clients' homes providing a range of support, such as mobility and hygiene assistance. This chapter draws on a recent investigation into the work and learning of a small cohort of such HCWs and maps how they exercise agency in their work practice, work-related learning and development. These workers deployed, in different ways, their past personal experiences (e.g., work, life, education), the classroom training provided, opportunities to engage with other HCWs and support from other informed sources in learning the requirements for their role. Moreover, these workers exercised agentic action by "personalising" their scaffolding or learning supports. That is, they constructed, engaged with, and subsequently relinquished scaffolding as personally necessitated, rather than relying on "experts" to decide how and when these forms of learning support should be enacted and withdrawn. Important here is how these workers' subjectivities are found to include actions and monitoring of performance, not just ideas and dispositions. Through an account of how this particular cohort exercised agentic action, some conclusions are drawn and recommendations made for the best ways of progressing the learning and development of such socially-isolated workers.

Key words: Agency, agentic action, worker agency, workplace learning, home care workers, supervision, independent learning, socially-isolated learners, personal epistemologies, subjectivities, manual handling, classroom training

1. The significance of agency in socially isolated workplaces

Contemporary accounts of learning socially-derived knowledge, such as that required for occupations, often emphasise the importance of immediate guidance from more informed and experienced social partners, such as teachers and co-workers (e.g., Brown & Palincsar, 1989;

Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989; Gherardi, 2009; Hughes, Jewson, & Unwin, 2013). Yet, the changing nature of work participation, including more work being conducted in relative social and/or geographical isolation (e.g., working from home, shift work) means that much of our learning for work today occurs in the absence of such partners (Billett, 2010; Billett, Ehrich, & Hernon-Tinning, 2003). Consequently, there must be ways of learning the knowledge and skills required for occupational practice without close and expert guidance. Central to such considerations is the significance of the relationship between the social contributions to and personal practices of the individual in that learning.

Learning the requirements for a new occupational role can be challenging at any time, but perhaps even more so for those who work without direct supervision and support. From their very first day “on-the-job”, workers in these situations are required to personally direct and manage the actions and interactions that comprise their workplace learning. Such practices are proposed as “agentic actions”, and the process by which individuals critically evaluate and choose these actions and level of engagement as “agency” (Billett, 2006). Socially-isolated workers might also be described as requiring particularly agentic personal epistemologies (i.e. ways of knowing, thinking and acting), as they self-manage their learning, develop their unique worker identities and enact their occupational practice, all in the absence of expert guidance. These circumstances call for resourcefulness by workers and work organisations if they are to learn and work productively and safely. For individual workers, unique actions and learning practices may be required, while for work organisations, a degree of flexibility may be required in finding creative and collaborative ways of supporting learning of their isolated workers.

In this chapter, the particular focus for examining agentic action in the absence of expert guidance is a group of Australian home care workers (HCWs), who are required to transfer and adapt classroom-taught manual handling skills and knowledge to their

workplaces. These workers do not have the close support and guidance of more experienced colleagues, as they conduct their practice in the privacy of their clients' homes. Instead, they are expected to complete the (often novel and challenging) tasks that comprise this role in relative social isolation. The discussion in this chapter draws upon a recent investigation of a small cohort of newly recruited HCWs from an Australian home care organisation. The 14 informants recruited for the investigation comprised both males and females varying in age, cultural background, and life (including previous education and work) experience. For purposes of confidentiality, all informants, and the organisation, were assigned pseudonyms. De-identified qualitative data were obtained in the form of direct observations of workplace practices, and semi-structured interviews. These data aimed to capture ways in which new workers were adapting their classroom manual handling training to their relatively socially isolated workplaces (i.e., clients' homes), and to understand how best to support these workers to learn and enact safe home care practices. A more detailed description and justification of the methods and procedures used for this study can be found in Palesy (2015).

Principally, this chapter is concerned with elaborating the kinds of agency and agentic action deployed when learning socially-derived knowledge (i.e., occupational competence) in the absence of expert guidance. However, the aim of this chapter is also to propose practical ways for organisations to support learner agency and achieve effective learning for their staff who work and learn in the absence of expert guidance. This aim is realised through, firstly, considering the nature of home care work, and the existing training provisions for new workers. This is followed by a discussion of how personal subjectivities, such as dispositions, intentionality and agency, shape learning for work. These subjectivities, which are held to go beyond the individuals' sense of self and include the action of that self, are then presented and discussed in light of how HCWs in this inquiry exercised agentic action. The chapter concludes with some recommendations for the best ways of progressing the learning and

development of workers who conduct their practice in the absence of direct supervision and support.

2. Working and learning in Australian home care

The Australian population is ageing, in keeping with global trends (ARC Centre of Excellence in Population Ageing Research [CEPAR], 2014a; Quinn, Markkanen, Galligan, Sama, Kriebal et al., 2016). In 2014, 15% of Australians were aged 65 and over, compared to 8% in 1964. Moreover, in the past 20 years there has been a ninefold increase in the number of people aged 85 and over, up to 1.9% of the population in 2014 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2015). This demographic change is driving the need for health care at an unprecedented rate (CEPAR, 2014a). Home-based health and social care models, in particular, are becoming viable options for aged care policy makers, as they promise greater cost-efficiency, and respect the preferences of an increasing number of people to receive formal care in their own homes (CEPAR, 2014a; Craven, Byrne, Sims-Gould & Martin-Matthews, 2012). Consequently, paid HCW jobs are growing in demand.

Today, a complex web of financial arrangements provides the funding for home and community-based care in Australia. Responsibilities for this provision fall to Commonwealth, State and Territory, and Local Governments, private funding agreements, and community (not-for-profit) organisations, all offering care to people suffering chronic illnesses, disability, or physical and cognitive decline. This fragmented allocation of services lends itself to problematic regulation and coordination (Clark & Lewis, 2012). Across all systems, however, the home care sector is one of Australia's largest employing industries (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2013). Approximately 350,000 staff are employed in the sector, with a projected requirement of 830,000 – 1.3 million workers by 2050 (CEPAR, 2014b). So, issues with the regulation of home care work combined with

exponential growth highlights the need for effective education and training initiatives to improve the quality of home care work and support HCWs in their roles.

Home care assists individuals to live as independently as possible in their own homes and communities. The rapid expansion of this sector in Australia, combined with a chronic shortage of qualified nurses, has resulted in the majority of this work being performed by lower skilled workers (Australian Nursing Federation, 2009; CEPAR, 2014b). These workers assist with basic activities of daily living (e.g., mobilising, bathing, toileting, shopping, meal preparation) and more advanced tasks (e.g., medication administration, tube feeding, urine drainage, operation of technology such as electric wheelchairs and mechanical hoists). These tasks all involve a degree of manual handling. That is, they require workers to use parts of their musculoskeletal systems to lift, lower, push, pull, hold, carry, move or restrain an object, load or body part (Australian Government, Australian Safety and Compensation Council, 2007). As such, manual handling stands as an activity that HCWs need to understand and be able to enact in ways that are safe both for themselves and their clients, and usually comprises part of a new HCW's orientation to their role. In sum, home care work represents a challenging and diverse set of activities that require the application of skills in different ways, purposes and circumstances, all without direct supervision or support.

The Australian home care workforce consists mainly of female, middle-aged, entry level workers (ABS, 2014; CEPAR, 2014b), who are often from ethnic minority groups (AIHW, 2009). These workers tend to be casual or part-time, and earn below the average national wage (ABS, 2014). Moreover, this profile of a typical HCW is reflected internationally, in countries such as the US (Quinn et al., 2016), and some European countries (Boerma, Kroneman, Hutchinson & Saltman, 2013). The HCW role, consequently, is often held in low esteem (Stone, 2004). HCWs may be perceived as poorly educated women who simply draw upon their skills as mothers to perform their menial, poorly paid home care roles

(Meagher, 2006; Nay & Garratt, 2002; Somerville, 2006). Yet, this professional role is physically and emotionally challenging, requiring competence in a range of basic and complex tasks, all performed alone in peoples' private homes. Job preparation and training frequently fail to prepare these workers for their home care roles (Stone, Sutton, Bryant, Squillace & Adams, 2013), as evidenced by disturbing rates of occupational injuries (e.g., muscle strains, violence, exposure to infectious agents and dangerous chemicals, sharps injuries) and high staff turnover (Markkanen, Quinn, Galligan, Sama, Brouillette, 2014; Quinn et al., 2016; Stone et al., 2013). Conversely, many HCWs report a high level of job satisfaction (Quinn et al., 2016). They value the close relationships they develop with their clients, and the autonomy that a home-based workplace affords (Quinn et al., 2016). Therefore, training and job preparation for HCWs needs to encompass strategies that encourage them to embrace this autonomy, and work safely at the same time. That is, we need to support these workers to exercise agency in their work and learning.

Brief induction classroom training sessions in the Australian home care sector are a common method of orientating new HCWs to their roles, conveying information such as safe manual handling, managing challenging behaviours, infection control and other important safety procedures. Classroom-based manual handling training, specifically, has been largely unsuccessful in reducing the alarming rates of musculoskeletal (predominantly back) injuries amongst these workers (Faucett, Kang & Newcomer, 2013; Markkanen et al., 2014). While larger organisations may offer more systematic, mandated training programs, smaller ones tend to provide more ad-hoc and fewer hours of training, citing financial constraints or workers "already skilled enough" as reasons why this is the case (Baldock & Mulligan, 2000). Moreover, these sessions vary in format, content and duration (Aylward, Stolee, Keat & Johncox, 2003; Baldock & Mulligan, 2000; Bernoth, 2009). For example, some HCWs attend brief classroom training followed by a period of supervised practice in the workplace

of up to two weeks, others receive no formal induction training for their roles at all (Palesy, 2015).

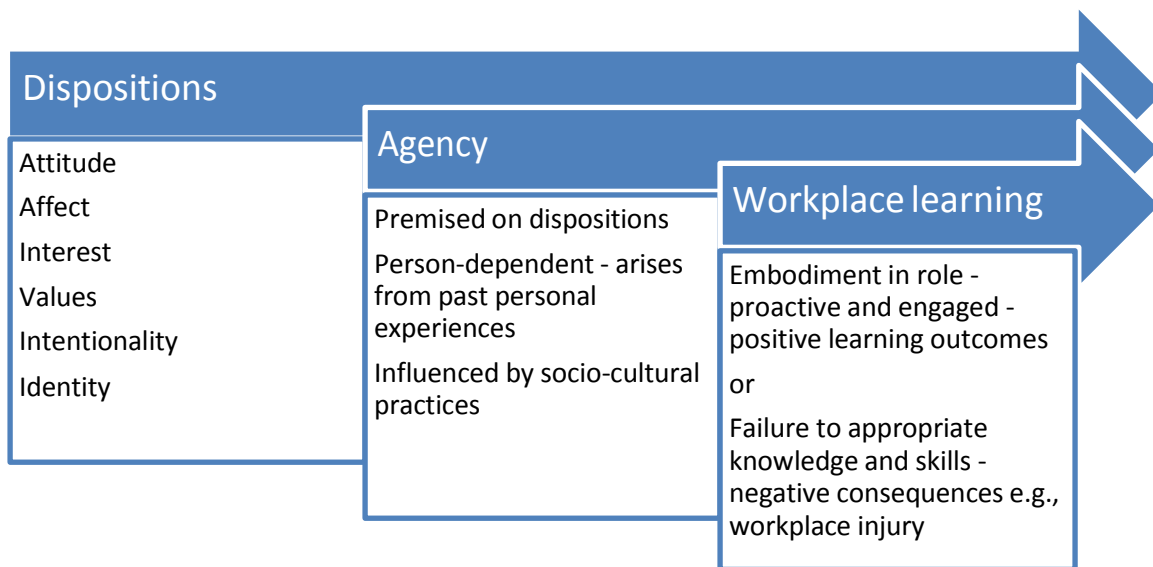
An additional concern is the failure of HCWs to take up or sustain safe manual handling techniques in their isolated workplaces, for reasons such as: (a) personal disposition for learning without direct support; (b) inadequacy of education experiences being offered in classrooms and workplaces; and (c) the degree of organisational support (Bernoth, 2009; Palesy, 2015). This perfunctory and inconsistent workplace preparation creates a unique set of challenges for HCWs as they seek to apply what they learn in the classroom to tasks in the privacy of clients' homes, all in the absence of expert guidance. Therefore, understanding how best to assist these workers to effectively learn their occupational practice, and thereby reduce the incidence of musculoskeletal injury, represents an important and worthwhile task.

3. Subjectivities: How personal epistemologies influence agentic actions

From a socio-cultural perspective, Pea (1987) claims that learning and transfer are selective, in so far as individuals will only transfer what they consider to be appropriate and consistent with their individual values and culturally-endorsed practices. In this way, their values, beliefs and interests come to the fore. According to Pea, part of this selective transfer includes learners deciding for themselves whether or not the knowledge transfer is worthwhile. Yet, while the cognitive constructivist perspective considers workplace learning in terms of securing conceptual and procedural goals for competent performance, less attention has been paid to individual learner subjectivities such as dispositions (Billett, 1997; Evans, Hodkinson, Rainbird, & Unwin, 2006; Perkins, Jay & Tishman, 1993). Certainly, person-dependent dispositions are likely to influence learners' understanding and construction of concepts and procedures and how these are utilised in activities such as workplace practices (Billett, 1997; Collin, Paloniemi, Virtanen & Eteläpelto, 2008; Evans et

al., 2006; Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008). In short, these learner subjectivities direct and motivate agentic action, which may have positive or negative consequences for workplace learning. Figure 3.1 provides an overview of these subjectivities, and depicts the relationship between dispositions, agency and workplace learning.

Figure 3.1. Dispositions, agency and workplace learning



Dispositions have been described as individuals’ tendencies to put their capabilities into action (Perkins et al., 2003). Their executive properties, such as attitudes, values, affect and interest (Prawat, 1989), intentionality (Noe, 1986; Salas, Tannenbaum, Krager & Smith-Jentsch, 2012), and sense of self or identity (Billett & Pavlova, 2005; Collin, 2009; Collin et al., 2008) are held to influence the differences between what learners are capable of doing and what tasks they actually undertake (Collin, 2009; Collin et al., 2008; Hodkinson et al., 2008; Perkins et al., 1993). In this way, dispositions are considered to have both person-dependent and situational dimensions: they are inherent in an individual’s representation and organisation of knowledge structures (Hoffman, 1986; Perkins et al., 1993), arise from

personal histories (Rogoff, 1990), and are shaped by situational and cultural practices (Billett, 1997).

Dispositions are central to how HCWs exercise their agency to take care of their bodies and work in ways that prevent injury through inappropriate manual handling. Some studies report that HCWs are motivated to apply their classroom manual handling to stay fit and healthy for their loved ones, and to remain in the workforce (e.g., Palesy, 2015; Town, 2005). However, a prevailing attitude in the health care sector is that musculoskeletal injuries are an inevitable part of the work, and many workers consider their roles to be a “labour of love” (Markkanen et al., 2014; Pompeii, Lipscomb, Schoenfisch & Dement, 2009; Reme, Shaw, Boden, Tveito, O’Dey, et al., 2014). In these instances, both person-dependent (e.g., maintaining good health) and socio-cultural factors (e.g., manual handling injuries are an accepted part of work in health care) have shaped the dispositions of workers in the health care sector and have either positively or adversely affected the transfer of their manual handling training (Bernoth, 2009; Markkanen et al., 2014; Palesy, 2015; Pompeii et al., 2009; Reme et al., 2014; Town, 2005).

It follows, therefore, that learning the practice requirements for work appears to depend as much on the trainees’ intentionality or inclination to apply their learning as it does on their actual workplace situation (Salas et al., 2012). In classroom settings, some HCWs may demonstrate mastery over appropriation, as described by Wertsch (1998). That is, they are compliant learners and will simply master or replicate the skills without real commitment and as a product of social suggestion (i.e., the peer pressure of colleagues in a classroom, organisationally mandated training). However, because of their individual values and beliefs (e.g., decontextualised training, no perceived need to change current practices), they may fail to make the knowledge their own, or appropriate the manual handling skills in the workplace

(Palesy, 2015; Town, 2005). So, there appears to be a clear and negotiated relationship between individuals' thinking and acting, and the sociocultural setting in which they act.

Furthermore, despite the external or social press of workplaces, individuals may still exercise their agency in ways associated with maintaining their sense of self and identity (i.e. subjectivity) (Billett, Barker, & Hernon-Tinning, 2004; Billet & Pavlova, 2005; Collin, 2009; Collin et al., 2008; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004). In this way, their subjectivities extend to how they act, and are not restricted to ideas and goals. This claim is supported by Somerville (2006), who found that few aged care workers had any previous desire to enter this sector as a vocation, yet their engagement in the role very quickly led to the formation of subjectivities which identified with and valued the work, as evident in how they performed it. In the case of these workers, Somerville concluded that mandated manual handling training did little to contribute to their learning to work safely. Instead, it was the practice of their daily work and the formation of subjectivities as aged care workers that was crucial to their learning – they became “embodied” in the role.

In the same way, HCWs learning manual handling in the classroom, and then adapting these practices to the workplace, may exercise their agency and become embodied in their roles, with either positive or negative consequences for their learning. On one hand, the autonomy afforded by working in clients' private homes may require effortful engagement by HCWs, which may lead to highly proactive and engaged learners with rich learning outcomes and sense of occupational subjectivity (Billett, 2010). Alternatively, given this work is poorly supervised and regulated, and home care role is commonly viewed as an extension of the mothering role (Markkanen et al., 2014; Nay & Garratt, 2002), workers in this sector may come to view it and themselves as being unimportant and accept musculoskeletal injury as part of the job. So, an occupational subjectivity which includes

being self-sacrificing by these workers may lead to poor learning outcomes and practices (Clarke, 2013).

In summary, person-dependent dispositions such as attitude, values, affect, interest, intentionality and identity motivate and direct individuals' agentic action (Collin, 2004; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä & Paloniemi, 2013; Smith, 2005), affecting learning outcomes in productive (e.g., prevention of workplace injury, autonomous work role) or destructive (e.g., injury as an accepted part of home care, no perceived relevance of training, role held in low esteem) ways. These subjectivities also mediate how individuals interpret and engage with what is afforded in their workplaces (Billett, 2010) and influence how individuals negotiate with and learn from the social world in which they engage. So, there is interdependence in the workplace learning process. It is influenced by both personal and situational factors, and the interplay between each occurs in different and distinct ways for workers as shaped by workplace circumstances (Billett, 2010; Collin, 2004). One set of such circumstances is the relative social isolation of these workers (e.g., in the home care setting), where workers are required to learn concepts and procedures (e.g., manual handling techniques) that are derived from the social world, with negligible support or supervision.

4. Recounting the agentic action of HCWs

In learning the requirements for their home care roles without direct supervision or support, workers in this investigation deployed, in different ways, their past personal experiences (e.g., work, life, education), the classroom training provided, opportunities to engage with other HCWs and support from other informed sources in learning the requirements for their role. Moreover, these workers exercised agentic action by "personalising" their own scaffolding or learning supports. That is, they selected, engaged with, and subsequently withdrew from engaging with their learning supports as personally required, rather than

relying on an “expert” to decide how and when these forms of learning support should be used and withdrawn. Examples of this agentic action are presented in Table 4.1. The left-hand column identifies the agentic action which emerged from the data, and the second left column provides sample responses from informants to support this action. The next column sources the disposition which appears to have initiated the agentic action of these workers, and the right-hand column provides a brief explanation of the learning outcomes in each specific situation.

Table 4.1. Learning in the absence of expert guidance: Agentic action

Agentic action	Sample responses	Source of disposition	Learning outcome
Workers consider their own personal circumstances, experiences or situations when learning without expert guidance	“I was relating [the classroom training] to what I already knew about cranes and pallet jacks to people hoists” [Rick]	Interest, identity	Dispositions and previous experience in working with machinery supported Rick to successfully learn how to operate a mechanical hoist without expert guidance
	“I just thought ‘well there’s the bathroom, it’s like mine. There’s this, there’s that, it’s like mine’...I just made simple comparisons” [Di]	Attitude, affect, intentionality	Dispositions, shaped by the situation, enabled Di to safely bathe a client in a small bathroom
Socially-isolated workers apply classroom training to their work only if there is a perceived personal benefit	“I’m used to doing it differently [to the classroom training] and I didn’t think I could reprogram myself to do it [the trainer’s] way” [Kate]	Attitude, identity, intentionality	A lifetime of experience supporting her disabled sister pressed Kate into disregarding all classroom training
	“[These are] exactly the same exercises my wife did when she had the kids. So I didn’t feel as though it applied to me” [Rick]	Attitude, interest, identity	Rick’s identity as a male pressed him to disregard the back care exercises taught in the classroom
Workers draw upon their resilience and extensive life experience when learning without expert guidance	“I’ve raised a daughter on my own...I [can] look out for myself” [Jen]	Attitude, values, identity	Jen’s identity as a resilient single mother supported her to work safely without supervision or support
	“I can cope on my own, I have a lot of life experience and I have worked in a lot of different jobs, so I am assertive ... I can always work out the right thing to do” [Joe]	Attitude, affect, identity	Joe’s previous experience emigrating from Portugal and adjusting to life and work in Australia provided the self-belief that he could work successfully in the absence of expert guidance.
Socially-isolated workers seek opportunities to engage with peers and others outside of the classroom	“We need to be able to phone-a-friend” [Mike]	Attitude, values, identity, intentionality	Each time he was required to perform new manual handling practice in his client’s private home, Mike contacted a more experienced worker for telephone support to ensure that he was working safely
	“What I’d really like to see are [care worker] meetings, where we can sit around and say “listen, I’ve got this situation, what do you think I should do?” [Di]	Attitude, values, intentionality, identity	Di regularly asked the organisation’s coordinator for regular meetings as part of new workers’ learning support. Di also considered that these meetings would assist HCWs to feel part of a professional organisation
Socially-isolated workers use written materials in the workplace e.g., organisational policies, work instructions, classroom handout as a form of learning support	“Even if you don’t need them or use them...it’s good to have a safety net” [Anne]	Values, intentionality, identity	Anne referred to the classroom handout frequently to effectively assist her learning in the first few weeks in her HCW role. Anne also considered these materials as a means of professionalising the HCW role
	“I used them all the time in the beginning...but not as much these days” [Rick]	Values, interest, intentionality	Drawing upon his previous mechanical experience, Rick frequently referred to instruction manuals to assist him to work safely with his client.

Table 4.1 identifies five categories of agentic action reported by HCWs when learning in the absence of expert guidance. These are: (a) the value of personal experience; (b) perceived relevance; (c) resilience; (d) peer support; and (e) written materials as learning support. Each is now briefly elaborated.

Throughout the investigation, informants consistently declared that they drew strongly on their personal experiences and previous situations while learning and applying their classroom training. This was particularly the case in the early stages of learning the requirements for their roles (i.e., in the first four weeks on-the-job). Described by one informant as making “simple comparisons”, this view is supported by Collin (2004) and Gergen (1994), who also suggest that individuals draw upon their own personal histories and circumstances in reconciling what they experience. An additional example is informant Di, who recounted a situation in which a client had fallen out of the wheelchair onto the floor. When describing how this potentially catastrophic situation was managed, the new worker considered previous jobs, mothering, commonsense and her recent classroom training as being important in assisting her to keep both herself and the client safe and free from injury. This scenario exemplifies the person-dependence of HCWs when learning to enact safe manual handling techniques in circumstances of relative social isolation. That is, in the absence of adequate training and guidance, they exercise agentic action by drawing upon a range of personal understandings, procedures and values to work safely with their clients.

In keeping with the person-dependence of these learners, many informants also reported that application or adaptation of the classroom manual handling training to their workplaces would take place only if they could perceive a benefit for themselves. For example, informant Kate, whose personal history included many years of providing support to her younger sister with a high level of physical disability, failed to perceive the relevance of the classroom training as she already was confident with manual

handling techniques. In the case of this worker, her personal history and life experience had afforded access to an extensive range of scenarios from which to search for manual handling solutions in the workplace. Consequently, Kate exercised agentic action by actively and openly rejecting the classroom training in favour of her existing knowledge about manual handling.

In keeping with the self-confidence displayed by Kate, assertiveness and resilience were also reported by informants as personal factors that supported the application of classroom manual handling skills and knowledge to the workplace. Strongly linked to these attributes were both the personal lives and past work experiences of workers, where they reported having lived or worked alone as a factor which assisted their learning in the isolated circumstances of clients' homes. Informant Jen, for example, recalled her experience as a single mother, and also a previous unskilled job in a chicken processing factory, where workers constantly squabbled and frequently consulted the supervisor over trivial matters, as triumphs which assisted her to work and learn in a role without direct support and supervision. This worker (and others) may be considered as having a high level of personal agency, in that they conduct their working lives and workplace learning in view of their own personal interests and goals (Billett & Pavlova, 2005; Collin, 2009; Collin et al., 2008; Somerville, 2006). With past personal achievements in working or raising families alone, some new workers appeared to embrace the autonomy afforded by the privacy of clients' homes.

Conversely, while independence in the workplace was welcomed, many informants reported the need for increased support from peers and others when learning to work safely in their clients' homes. Indeed, some new workers admitted to seeking assistance and support outside the organisational guidelines, which stipulated that all work-related issues should be directed to the service coordinator in the first instance.

For example, new worker Mike phoned a more experienced colleague outside of working hours after his client experienced a seizure during a manual handling task. Having not witnessed seizure (i.e., involuntary muscle spasms) activity before, Mike confessed that he was terrified and did not know how to respond appropriately. Describing this strategy as “phone-a-friend”, this worker exercised agentic action by pursuing an opportunity (despite potential organisational reproach) to meet, discuss and learn about the issue with his peers in an environment away from the client’s home.

Other opportunities were also sought by new HCWs to engage with and learn from others. For example, they participated enthusiastically in the practical manual handling group activities prescribed in the classroom without any prompting by the trainer, and reported this group work as a constructive way to exchange information and ideas, and learn more about their home care role. Terms such as “forums” and “meetings” were used frequently in the interview responses from informants, and many of these new workers emphatically requested a regular return to the classroom for the purpose of refreshing and extending their knowledge and skills in manual handling.

This type of engagement as a means of assisting learning is supported by Billett (2011), whose study of mature-aged Singaporean workers reported that older workers did not want to be treated as students who needed instruction from others, but preferred instead to engage in “dialogue forums”. The study suggested that these forums, held in or around the workplace (e.g., on-the-job, meal breaks), would provide rich learning opportunities whereby workers could share their knowledge and learn from others at the same time, without positioning themselves as students in a teacher-student relationship (Billett, 2011). Similarly, without supervision or support, these socially-isolated workers exercised agentic action by seeking and engaging intentionally in learning activities in ways independent of the organisation’s training manual handling training

curriculum, and, particularly, as a means of sharing information and ideas amongst workers, providing instruction and debriefing.

The final theme associated with agentic action of HCWs is found in new workers' use of written materials to support their learning in the absence of expert guidance. The provision of hard copies of organisational policies and procedures in these socially-isolated workplaces, along with a set of step-by-step instructions and photographs depicting how to perform key manual tasks were welcomed by informants as a valuable form of learning support, and a "handy reference" for performing tasks in the absence of support from their trainer or peers.

However, a changing pattern of engagement with these written materials was identified from this study of HCWs. Dependence on policies, procedures and instructions for learning the manual handling requirements of their role was most evident in the first 4 weeks post classroom training. At 12 weeks, conversely, less reliance on these supports was reported, and workers placed more value on the sociality arising from interactions with peers and their client as a way of monitoring their manual handling performance. These socially-isolated workers still considered written materials to be an important form of learning support or "safety net", however, and many informants had directed new(er) workers to these resources as a means of learning and enacting safe manual handling techniques.

Reliance on policies and procedures as a major source of practical knowledge is supported in studies of nurses (Hancock, Wiseman & King, 2013; Melnyk, Canagher & Ford,

Long, Fineout-Overholt, 2014). Isolation (e.g., of nurses in remote settings), limited access to computers, and time constraints may be factors which contribute to this trust

in written resources as the main source of information from an organisation

(Estabrooks, Floyd, Scott-Findlay, O'Leary & Gushta, 2003). The same may be true for

HCWs. In clients' homes, where shifts are often only of 2-3 hours duration and consist

largely of physical activities, there is little time to access other sources of information, such as newspapers and journal articles. Moreover, the nature of these workers (e.g., entry level) suggests that they may not have the skills required to access, read and critically appraise other sources of information, and may believe they lack the authority to implement any findings into practice (Gerrish & Clayton, 2004). In any case, the HCWs in this investigation initiated and exercised agentic action by engaging with what was afforded as learning support in their socially-isolated workplaces. Furthermore, they exercised agentic action by using these written resources as a form of learning support in very different and personal ways. This person-dependence and personalised learning support is offered as a means of espousing and illustrating the agency of HCWs, and is discussed in the next section.

5. Substantiating the agentic action of HCWs

The previous section discussed five themes which demonstrate how HCWs in the study exercised agentic action: (a) the value of personal experience; (b) perceived relevance; (c) resilience; (d) peer support; and (e) written materials as learning support. This discussion and supporting sample responses from informants emphasise the highly person-dependent nature of their work and learning processes in the absence of expert guidance. Personal capacities, previous experiences (e.g., work, life, educational), life histories, and ongoing negotiations with the social world shape how individuals respond to and engage with their work and learning, and in this study were shown to influence how these workers learn and enact the skills required for home care work. These workers exercised a high degree of personal agency, in that they each set their own personally particular agenda for learning the requirements of the role and for conducting their occupational practice, and then took and monitored their actions in addressing those goals (Billett & Pavlova, 2005; Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

Moreover, person-dependent factors likely mediate how learners engage with what is afforded in both their workplaces and their social world (Billett, 2010; Collin, 2004). This person-dependence appears to be the case for HCWs who conduct their practice in the absence of expert guidance. More specifically, the concepts of personal epistemologies and scaffolding offer explanations of how these individuals exercise agentic action in relatively socially-isolated circumstances. These two concepts are briefly elaborated here.

HCWs of this investigation cited various personal rationales for taking up (or rejecting) the manual handling techniques taught in the classroom, and applying them to their support tasks in their clients' private homes. In most cases, they considered their own personal circumstances, experiences or situations when learning the requirements for their role, relating what they already knew about previous work (e.g., with warehouse pallet jacks) to tasks performed with their clients (e.g., using people hoists). If new workers could perceive a benefit to themselves, such as the health and wellbeing of their children, they were more likely to be engaged learners (Billett & Pavlova, 2005; Pea, 1987; Somerville, 2006). Moreover, informants suggested that their resilience and life experience (e.g., sole parenting) were character traits that assisted them to "work things out" when learning in the absence of expert guidance. Such findings coincide with what Gergen (1994) proposes about how our actions in the present are always a synthesis of earlier moments, relationships, and contexts, in making sense of what we experience.

Therefore, it seems that the learning and working processes of these individuals are highly dependent upon their personal experiences and epistemologies, perhaps even more so than for those who learn and work with the close guidance of others. That is, personal capacities, previous experiences, life histories and ongoing negotiations with the social world, all influence how socially-isolated workers engage in, and learn the

requirements for, their occupational practice (Rogoff, 1990; Scribner, 1985; Valsiner, 2000). Moreover, findings from this investigation suggest that the personal epistemologies of workers who conduct their occupational practice in the absence of expert guidance, are likely to be more personally agentic (Billett et al., 2003; Smith, 2005) than those with access to direct supervision and support. Consequently, learning safe work practices in the absence of direct guidance is person dependent and may be successfully negotiated by individuals agentially. However, appropriate curriculum and training provisions can support and augment the exercise of individual agency. One such support is scaffolding provided by artefacts, which are discussed here.

Besides the personal bases for learning in the absence of expert guidance, the provision of hard copies of written materials (e.g., classroom handout, organisational policies and procedures, step-by-step instructions for key manual handling tasks), and engagement with others outside the workplace, was reported as enhancing the work and learning for these HCWs. These materials and workers' engagement acted as "scaffolding", a term used to capture the nature of support and guidance in learning and development (Bruner, 1975; Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). A typical trajectory is for teachers and more knowledgeable others to scaffold the learning of a novice, assisting them to meaningfully participate in, and gain skills in tasks that are beyond their unassisted abilities (Belland, Drake & Liu, 2011). Then, the scaffolding is removed or "faded" by the teacher once the task is mastered (Brown & Palincsar, 1989; Collins et al., 1989; Wertsch, 1985). Rather than initiation, construction and removal of scaffolding by the expert, however, this inquiry's informants were found to take decisions to engage with and then withdraw the learning support themselves. That is, they managed the scaffolding, through active self-monitoring of their progress.

Furthermore, these informants were selective about the type of scaffolding used to support their learning in the absence of expert guidance, and some required less

scaffolding than others. Even where the materials were not needed, their presence provided an implicit form of support, described as a “safety net”. So, the ways in which these socially-isolated workers utilised instructional scaffolding offers a different perspective than those adopted in orthodox accounts, in which the use of scaffolding is constructed and incrementally relinquished by teachers or experts (Brown & Palincsar, 1989; Bruner, 1975; Collins et al., 1989; Wertsch, 1985; Wood et al., 1976). In contrast, these workers “personalised” their scaffolding: that is, they constructed it based on their personal learning requirements, and took the decisions to dismantle the scaffolding themselves. In some ways these workers assumed the roles of both instructor *and* learner through the exercise of their personal epistemologies. This distinction emphasises again, how learning in the absence of expert guidance is personally-mediated and agentic.

6. Supporting the agentic action of HCWs

Accordingly, what follows are recommendations about supporting learning in view of the personal bases for learning in circumstances of relative social isolation. These recommendations are presented in Table 6.1. The left-hand column reiterates the agentic theme as already described, and the right-hand column proposes strategies for supporting the learning of socially-isolated workers in each theme.

Table 6.1. *Effective workplace learning in the absence of expert guidance: Supporting agentic action*

Agentic action	Supportive Strategies
Workers consider their own personal circumstances, experiences or situations when learning in the absence of expert guidance	Classroom training sessions to encourage new workers to sharing their personal histories and experiences related to “caring” in the home
Socially-isolated workers will apply or adapt classroom training to their workplace only if there is a perceived personal benefit to themselves	Classroom training sessions to include practical group work during which work-related experience and information can be exchanged with peers
Resilience and extensive life experience are essential character traits when learning in the absence of expert guidance	Encourage sharing of personal stories from others (e.g., peers, trainers, coordinators)
Socially-isolated workers seek opportunities to engage with peers and others outside of the organisational guidelines	Classroom training sessions to encourage new workers to relate their classroom knowledge to their own personal circumstances while learning in the workplace
Written materials in the workplace e.g., organisational policies and procedures, step-by-step work instructions, classroom handout, are a valuable form of learning support for socially-isolated workers.	Encourage new workers to embrace their unique personal histories, and use them as reference points from which to initially learn, and then extend their professional knowledge and skills.
	Provide opportunities for workers to meet with their peers and others in formal settings e.g., team meetings, additional classroom training
	Encourage sharing of personal stories from others (e.g., peers, trainers, coordinators)
	Reiterate the value of personal histories when learning and extending workplace knowledge and skills
	Provide a uniform set of written resources in each socially-isolated workplace, without rigid stipulations about how and when they should be accessed and utilised.

Table 6.1 proposes several classroom and workplace training provisions for supporting personally-mediated learning. Firstly, classroom training sessions for these individuals should consider a format that supports and encourages these workers to establish a positive disposition for their work, through sharing of personal histories and experiences related to caring, motivations and expectations in taking up the role. This format may include informal introductions, and practical group work, where trainees can exchange information and experiences. Moreover, in classroom settings, isolated workers could be encouraged by experts (e.g., classroom trainers) to embrace their unique experiences, and use them as reference points from which to initially learn, and then extend their professional knowledge and skills. In these ways, the development of personally agentic plans for learning and enacting the requirements of the role is “sanctioned” by the organisation before trainees even leave the classroom, and new workers may be more confident and supported in their socially-isolated roles.

Secondly, more opportunities should be provided within the employing agency’s organisational training framework for ongoing interaction and sharing of knowledge and skills. These opportunities could take the form of team meetings, learning forums, or additional classroom training opportunities, where the sharing of “war stories” (Orr, 1990) may reiterate the value of personal experience, and lead more easily to a shared understanding and creation of new knowledge.

A final recommendation is to continue to provide a range of learning supports or scaffolding for workers who practice and learn in the absence of expert guidance. In the case of these HCWs, written reference materials and access to others appear to have been the most useful supports. When providing these supports to isolated workers it may be important to consider again the personal learning capacities of individuals. So, it may be helpful to provide these supports (e.g., written resources) without rigid requirements for how and when they are to be accessed. The recommendation here is to

make available a uniform set of supports, and provide a clear explanation and directions for their use and access. However, beyond these instructions, rather than following a set organisational trajectory, the learners themselves should be encouraged to decide on the type and frequency of their interactions with these supports, and to access or withdraw these supports as required. In this way, each individual's unique and personal pathway to expertise is acknowledged.

7. Conclusions

This chapter offers an account into the work-related learning of a group of HCWs who conduct their occupational practice in the absence of expert guidance. In these circumstances, individuals deploy their personal experiences and histories, classroom training, opportunities to engage with others and support from other sources in learning, working and developing in their socially-isolated roles. So, learning in the absence of expert guidance is an experience which may be negotiated agentially by learners, premised on their dispositions and what is afforded in their social world.

This person-dependence may be mediated by effective training provisions, both in the classroom and workplace. Recommendations include a classroom format that encourages the development of positive worker subjectivities and dispositions for the specific occupational role. In addition to initial classroom training, group work and peer interaction should be promoted in forums such as team meetings and ongoing classroom training sessions. In the workplace, a uniform set of supports should be provided to facilitate effective learning. However, in view of individuals' personal learning capacities, they should be encouraged to decide on the type, depth and frequency of their engagement with these supports. Through acknowledging and supporting the agentic action of these socially-isolated workers, they may be encouraged to formulate

their own personal learning and development plans, and establish and advance their unique worker identities.

Finally, while this chapter advances a contemporary account of learning, it is concluded that there is more work to do here. Given that much of our work is indeed conducted in relative social isolation (e.g., in private homes) and, more specifically, in view of the expansion of the home care sector both in Australia and internationally, more research is needed on the kinds of education and training experiences that may facilitate learning and working safely in the absence of expert guidance.

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