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ABSTRACT

Taking a discursive approach to information seeking research can allow researchers to move away from considering information seekers' accounts as transparent and unproblematic representations their information behaviour or underlying cognitive and affective processes. This paper uses a constructivist discourse analytic approach to study the discursive functions performed by accounts of information seeking in a particular context – the ways that individuals use information-seeking stories to "position" themselves discursively. This paper analyses four modes of information practice (Active seeking, Active scanning, Everyday monitoring, Information seeking by proxy) present in participants' accounts of connecting with information sources. Although the four modes represent varying levels of active engagement in information seeking, accounts of the four modes fulfilled the same discursive function of demonstrating the individual to be an autonomous actor, someone who is active, connected, attentive to the environment, alert to unexpected possibilities, and receptive to appropriate forms of information. Working from a constructivist discourse analytic approach allows the researcher to attend both to the characteristics of the information-seeking context (in this case, pregnancy) and to the researcher-participant interaction and the functions that accounts of information seeking perform within it. It is then possible to study the ways that accounts of information seeking may themselves take discursive action.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional studies of information seeking in context have often treated information seekers' accounts as transparent and unproblematic representations their information behaviour. Tuominen and Savolainen (1) suggest that a discursive approach to information seeking research can enhance the understanding of the role of information in people's everyday lives by studying

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information use as discursive action. Instead of taking individuals' accounts as representative of internal cognitive and affective processes, a discursive approach analyses an account in the context of the discursive interaction in which it was produced. The account is then seen, not as a product of an individual mind, but as the product of the discursive environment in which it occurs.

Tuominen and Savolainen's (1, 87-88) analysis focusses on the discursive construction of previously sought or received information, and on how those constructions are put to use in talk or writing. For example, referring to an outside source of information ("I saw it on television,") allows a speaker to distance him- or herself from a particular point of view and represent it as coming from an external or independent source. (Jonathan Potter (2) calls this technique creating a sense of "out-there-ness.")

As Tuominen and Savolainen observe (1, 85), "the methodology suitable for studying discursive action is discourse analysis," specifically the constructivist form, developed by social psychologists and drawing on the work Jonathan Potter, Margaret Wetherell (2,3,4), Rom Harré (5), and their colleagues. This form of discourse analysis is interested in the ways that accounts are structured and made to appear factual (the *epistemological orientation* of discourse, (2)) and the rhetorical purposes to which such accounts are put (the *action orientation* of discourse, (2)). While Tuominen and Savolainen (1) use a constructivist discourse analytic perspective to analyse information *use*, this paper argues that the technique may also be applied to a study of the discursive functions performed by accounts of information *seeking* in particular contexts. The focus here is on the *action orientation* of information-seeking accounts, in other words, the ways that participants use information-seeking stories to "position" themselves discursively in the accounts they give (5).

Harré and van Langenhove (5, 17) describe the act of "positioning" as "the assignment of fluid 'parts' or 'roles' in the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts." In a conversation between a teacher and a

student, for example, the right to speak in a certain way (such as ordering the other to sit down), varies between the two speakers. The teacher and student therefore occupy different discursive positions, and the social meaning of what is said depends upon the position of the speakers. Positions, however, are not fixed to roles. First order positions – when one speaker positions another in a conversation – can be challenged in two ways: either within the conversation as it is taking place (e.g., "No, I won't sit down"), which Harré and van Langenhove call second order positioning, or within another discussion about the first conversation (e.g., "That teacher is too strict"), which they term third order positioning (5, 20-1). Research participants' accounts can be studied both as examples of first order positioning within the interviewer-participant interaction, and as instances of third order positioning when participants describe the ways they positioned, and were positioned by, other speakers.

This paper reports findings from an information-seeking-in-context study of 19 women who were undergoing a high risk pregnancy, one in which they were carrying twins. Specifically, I used a constructivist discourse analytic approach to analyze the discursive techniques that pregnant women used to construct their accounts of seeking information, and the discursive functions such accounts performed in positioning participants within the research interview.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Researchers in several social and health science disciplines have considered the place of information seeking during pregnancy and the role of pregnant women as information seekers (for example, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10). Pregnancy is an extremely rich information-seeking context. Browner and Press (11) suggest that getting and giving information is the fundamental function of American prenatal care, and that many women, reacting to popular literature and media representations, feel that being informed is "foremost among the responsibilities conferred by pregnancy" (11, 117).

Several characteristics make pregnancy a fruitful context in which to study information seeking.

First, a pregnancy constitutes a transitional period (7), and is of a finite duration. With a successful outcome, it leads to an expansion of the woman's role. Second, a North American pregnancy is attended by medical care providers and (particularly in the case of high-risk pregnancy) has an unknown and unknowable outcome. Third, for a mature woman in a stable relationship, a pregnancy is often considered a joyous thing, something to disclose. Fourth, a pregnancy is visible: a growing abdomen may disclose the pregnancy despite the pregnant woman's intent to conceal it. Likewise, infants and their caregivers are visible and identifiable when they are out in public places. Finally, pregnancy only happens to women. These contextual factors combine to create an environment in which

- pregnant women can ask, and are often expected to ask, questions about pregnancy, childbirth, and infancy;
- the pregnant woman's abdomen may make her an obvious and appropriate target for those who wish to offer her information;
- sources of information, in the form of other parents or caregivers of infants, are often easily identifiable.

For this study, I conducted, audio-recorded, and transcribed initial semi-structured in-depth interviews with 19 participants, who ranged in age from 19 to 40 years of age, and were between 11 and 35 weeks pregnant at our first meeting. Although participants were older and better educated than the average for women giving birth in province of Ontario, where participants lived, their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, marital status, and urban/rural place of residence were representative of the region in which they lived (12, 13). After the initial interview, I used a variation of the diary/diary-interview technique (14, 15) to stay in touch with participants during the following week. I then conducted follow-up interviews with 17 participants[1] between 5 and 13 days after the initial interview.

Data were analysed qualitatively using Strauss and Corbin's (16) coding technique and Potter and

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[1] Two had been hospitalized and were unavailable.

Wetherell's method of discourse analysis (2, 3). As part of the analysis process, I developed a two-dimensional model of the information-seeking practices described in participants' accounts of the information-seeking process. Several dimensions, or *modes,* of information practice coexisted in women's accounts of *connecting* and *communicating* (or attempting to connect or communicate) with information sources, including 1) active seeking of a known information source; 2) active scanning of likely sources or in likely environments; 3) finding information while doing "everyday monitoring" (17) of the world without the active intent to seek information, and 4) being given information or referred to an information source by some other agent. Because some of these forms of information seeking involve little or no active "information behaviour" (18) on the part of the information seeker, I prefer the term "information practices" to incorporate both what Wilson (18) terms "information behaviour" and those information-seeking activities not initiated by the original seeker. This paper presents accounts of *connecting* with information sources (McKenzie (19) presents an analysis of accounts of *communicating* with information sources) and analyses the ways that the four modes of information practice described within these accounts served to position participants as information seekers.

"I PICKED UP THE PHONE AND CALLED HER IMMEDIATELY": ACCOUNTS OF CONNECTING THROUGH ACTIVE SEEKING OF SOURCES

Active information seeking has received a great deal of attention from LIS researchers (20, 21). Active connecting practices consist of pre-emptive means of making or seeking contact with a likely information source. Participants described several varieties of active connecting practices, which included seeking contact with a source to meet a current need (such as calling the doctor's office between appointments), re-connecting with a previously used source to meet a new need (such as calling a former neighbour who has twins), or activating an ongoing informal consulting relationship for a specific need (for example, calling a friend to ask advice on buying baby clothes). In addition, women described actively pursuing relationships with potential sources against future needs (such as joining a multiple birth association in hopes of meeting other

parents of twins).

Although all participants described seeing their doctors for their scheduled appointments, very few women described making calls to the doctor's office between appointments. For the most part, appointments were frequent enough and calling the doctor was difficult enough that women described "saving up" their questions to ask at their next appointment. When participants did describe contacting their doctors between appointments, they framed these calls as necessary, resulting from the appearance of acute and worrisome symptoms. Stacy[2] described experiencing sudden bleeding and said, "I thought, well I better go. I called [the obstetrician]'s office." She used the word "emergency" in her description and emphasized the sense of crisis. Stacy's account is typical: when participants described calling the doctor's office between appointments, they emphasized that the need was very worrisome. In cases they did not frame as emergencies, participants told of asking other people, or keeping lists of questions to ask at their next scheduled doctor's appointments. Participants expressed concern about "bothering" the doctor in non-emergency cases: Karen observed that "sometimes you just don't think you can phone the doctor about *everything*, you know what I mean? Like, I mean, like I would be a pain in the neck." Accounts of connecting with physicians demonstrated that participants were aware of the fine line between being an active seeker and being an over-worried nuisance.

The same concern did not appear in accounts of connecting with social and family sources, even when those were medical professionals. Olivia described an ongoing consulting relationship with a pregnant friend who was a nurse: "One of my close friends here in [city] has been great, you know, just any time I have a question about anything I just call her." Such ongoing consulting relationships were often described quite casually. Gayle explained how she re-connected with a former neighbour who had twins:

> We'd kept in touch, not by weekly telephone calls or anything but, I've run into
> her at the grocery store, you know, we shop at the same grocery store now and,

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[2] All names are pseudonyms.

we'll stop and talk and, yack and, when I found out I was having twins I picked up
the phone and called her immediately.

This description allows a non-directed and non-purposive form of communication,"yacking," to take on an enhanced role, becoming retroactively meaningful and potentially purposive – maintaining the relationship that later facilitated information seeking. As Gayle's example demonstrates, sources with personal experience, particularly other mothers of twins, were described as very important, and many accounts of seeking out previously unknown individuals or groups concerned connecting with other parents of twins when none were available within the woman's own circle.

Accounts of making connections through active seeking enabled participants to position themselves as organized, pro-active, aware of their expected role, and well-connected, with a wide variety of resources at hand to meet their information needs. Participants often referred to the concept of "becoming informed," and framed this as part of the process of preparing for the births of their babies. Jacquie explained that she "decided to do some looking up or reading on my own to find out more information before the situation happens. To try to get informed that way, to make it easier cause it'll be a big transition." Becoming prepared or organized for the unknown and possibly chaotic period after the babies' arrival was an important theme in the stories participants told about themselves, and active information seeking was an essential component of that theme. In Jacquie's description, talking about "finding out more information before the situation happens" allows her to position herself as someone who both understands what is expected of her and is acting appropriately.

"I'M HERE, WHAT CAN YOU DO FOR ME?": ACCOUNTS OF CONNECTING THROUGH ACTIVE SCANNING

Practices associated with active scanning have received an increasing amount of attention by LIS researchers such as Choo and Auster (22), Wilson (18), and Erdelez and Rioux (23). Scanning

involves a known-subject but not a known-item search; seeking and recognizing appropriate information sources; not actively seeking information about a specific concern, but keeping in mind, as Donna put it, what is "kind of on my 'to do' list."

Women described scanning when they found or deliberately placed themselves in resource-rich environments, such as doctors' offices or bookstores. Natalia described how she identified a relevant pamphlet in her doctor's waiting room: "It was on a list for me to do. So, it was in my subconscious to be on the lookout for this." Karen described finding a "community room" at her doctor's office with pamphlets and walk-in Internet access: "I thought, I'm going to go check it out in case it has something for me. .... So, I just went snooping.... I just want to, basically, what do they have for me? It was just sort of a, 'I'm here, what can you do for me?'" Frances described having "a whole slew of just little pamphlets and little booklets, and some pretty big booklets that I picked up at pregnancy fairs and things."

Women also described scanning as they attempted to connect with published, electronic, or broadcast sources. Irene "just went to the book store and kind of went through" pregnancy books. Christine described active scanning on the Web as she searched for something relevant without a specific site in mind: she said, "I just did a search for 'twins,' 'multiple.'" Patty described regularly watching a pregnancy programme that recently contained a segment on twin birth: "It just happened to be something I watched on t.v. last night."

Descriptions of active scanning showed information seekers as capable of recognizing a likely information ground (24) – an information-rich place where she was aware that an appropriate source might be located, of identifying appropriate information sources, and of filtering irrelevant information. On the one hand, phrases like "on my to-do list," "on the back burner," and "in my subconscious" allow participants to demonstrate that they are aware of and attending to information needs, even those that might not be of current importance. On the other hand, the prevalence of the word "just": "I just did a search," "I just went snooping," "it just happened to be something I watched," and of off-handed phrases such as "check it out," "snooping," and

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"picked up," allow the participant to position herself as attentive to her environment and able to recognize relevant sources in unexpected places. Even in descriptions of this less pro-active mode of information practice, then, participants represented themselves as active, attentive, and watchful.

"IT JUST HAPPENED TO BE THERE": ACCOUNTS OF CONNECTING THROUGH EVERYDAY MONITORING

Everyday monitoring involves finding information during the course of conducting the regular activities that people do to get along in the world without actively seeking or scanning for information. This category includes the kinds of practices identified by Savolainen (17), Wilson (18), Williamson (25), and some of the practices described by Erdelez and Rioux (23).

Descriptions of everyday monitoring included accounts of finding information while regularly monitoring an information source (such as reading the newspaper or watching the news). Rachel explained how she and her husband "always get weekend papers cause we like to sit around and read the paper on the weekends." She described how they came across an article on baby safety: "It was in the front page of 'Lifestyles' or whatever it was and, just happened to be there. So my husband and I both read it."

In addition, descriptions of everyday monitoring consisted of accounts of serendipitous encounters of all kinds, occurring in locations such as the individual's workplace, a friend's home, or a grocery store or other public place. Women told of running into other mothers of twins in a huge variety of locations. Lynn described frequently encountering parents of twins – "I'd say maybe twice a week" – at her workplace. Participants described unexpected information encounters with friends, family, or coworkers in places such as the workplace, grocery stores, or other everyday locations they frequented. Natalia told of having a conversation with a coworker in the washroom at work when another acquaintance "came out of the middle stall" and joined the discussion.

Accounts of everyday monitoring were characterized by the use of casual terms ("it just happened to be there," "bumped into") and were often accompanied by expressions of surprise ("There they were"). Despite the fact that this mode of information practice is the least active of those initiated by the information seeker, accounts of everyday monitoring still enabled participants to position themselves as being actively engaged in meeting their information needs. Accounts of everyday monitoring allowed participants to emphasize their flexibility, alertness and attentiveness to their surroundings, and their receptiveness to new ideas and unexpected sources. While these are quite different characteristics from the pro-active organizational skills demonstrated by active seeking accounts, they nevertheless fulfill the function of demonstrating participants' attentiveness to the importance of information seeking during pregnancy.

"SHE'S ALWAYS ON THE LOOKOUT": ACCOUNTS OF CONNECTING BY PROXY

Library and information science researchers have described interpersonal referrals in specific settings (24) and through specific media (23, 25), gatekeeping (26), imposed queries (27), and other aspects of the social network in information seeking (28). Gross and Saxton (29) called this form of information practice the *imposed query,* "a question that is developed by one person and then given to someone else who will receive, hold, and transact the query for that person (ie, the imposer)" (29, 170-171). Both Gross (27) and Erdelez and Rioux (23) considered such information-seeking from the perspective of the agent actually asking the question. My participants, however, described this information practice, which I have called "information seeking by proxy," from the perspective of the imposer of the original question or the holder of the original information need. These kinds of accounts serve an extremely interesting set of functions in positioning the pregnant woman in relation to the image of the active and receptive information seeker.

My participants described three different kinds of proxy connections: they gave accounts of being identified as a potential information seeker by a potential source, they described specific

occasions on which people referred them to other information sources, and they told of family members or friends who sometimes acted as gatekeepers or intermediaries, providing referrals and direct information on a regular basis.

Occasionally, participants told stories of other people identifying them as needing information. This identification could permit either the pregnant woman to ask questions or the source to volunteer information. Identification occurred through self-disclosure or visibility. Holly explained how her visible position at work facilitated the casual discussion that often led to referrals:

> *We have 150 employees and I'm not the most important person but I'm in a very high-focus job where people know me cause whenever they want anything they have to come and see me.*

Even when Holly was not actively seeking information, then, her visibility in the workplace served discursively as evidence that she was connected to others who might provide her with relevant information.

Several women described receiving referrals to or copies of pregnancy or multiple parenting books, either as gifts or as "loaners" from friends and family members. Olivia described where her books came from:

> *The pregnancy ones came from friends. Actually, my sister-in-law gave me two. And, again, these are just like a loaner sort of thing.... And then the twins books um, my mum bought me one for Christmas. Yeah, she just gave me the one. And then another one was given to my husband by a woman at work. Someone had got it for her and then she found out she was actually having triplets.... And then the other one I just got actually on Saturday night. A few friends that I used to work with had just a little mini-shower for me and that, it was part of her gift.*

When considered as an example of third order positioning, this account shows how a number of unrelated women – husband's work colleague, sister-in-law, friends, mother – all positioned Olivia as someone who needs and should be seeking information about pregnancy, childbirth,

and parenting, and particularly about multiple pregnancy and parenting. In addition, published pregnancy books are accepted by all participants as legitimate, authoritative, and appropriate sources of information for a pregnant woman. The designation of the popular pregnancy book as an appropriate gift for an expectant mother is in itself a powerful form of discursive positioning.

Several women described having gatekeepers or intermediaries in their lives, people whom they described as making regular referrals and incorporating pregnancy and parenting concerns into their own information seeking on behalf of the pregnant woman. Patty's sister, a garage sale fan, was "always on the lookout for things that I may need." Patty also told how her mother and friends scanned the newspapers: "if something comes up, somebody sees something, somebody's selling a crib in the paper or another swing, they're always letting me know." In addition to providing leads on equipment, Barbara's sister-in-law "went in the Internet to try and find information about the twins club." Donna told how her sister-in-law regularly scanned for relevant reading material to pass along. "She read it somewhere and clipped it out. 'Do you want it?'.... She's not giving me tons of articles but she might pull something out. She was at a book sale, and she saw this book on twins and picked it up for us, that kind of thing. She reads *Chatelaine* [a Canadian women's magazine], she pulls out a few articles here and there, whatever."

Although gatekeepers were almost exclusively described in terms of their social role in relation to the pregnant woman, participants sometimes also described them within their professional roles. Frances explained how her mother was "always on the lookout for information, and obviously being a doctor, every time she finds a pamphlet or anything new that mentions either twins or babies or anything that I would be interested in, she picks it up for me." Rachel's mother, "works at the library and she sees a lot of people and she is working with someone who had twins and so she asks for me." In these cases, Frances and Rachel are positioning their mothers as information seekers, using their mothers' professions as evidence of their expertise. Frances's "obviously" accords her mother's behaviour a taken-for-granted quality – picking up pamphlets is part of what doctors *do*.

Discursively, accounts of information seeking by proxy perform four important functions. First, the prevalence of words like "always" in descriptions of the information and referral practices of friends and family members highlight the strength of the social connection and the commitment of the proxy searcher to the pregnant woman. In other words, these descriptions position the pregnant woman as someone who is connected to a caring community. Second, descriptions of proxy searches ascribe to the proxy searchers those qualities that the pregnant women claimed for themselves in accounts in which they were the agents: pro-active searching, attentiveness to the environment, and an ability to recognize relevance in unexpected places. Even when the speaker herself cannot claim to be actively searching, descriptions of proxy searches allow her to position herself as well-connected, surrounded by active and competent information seekers, and alert and receptive to unexpected and serendipitous encounters. Third, accounts of proxy searching can serve to justify the pregnant woman's failure to seek information on her own behalf: demonstrating that her information needs are being met by a committed and qualified proxy searcher can explain her failure to seek information without compromising her position as one who is appropriately preparing for impending multiple motherhood. Finally, when descriptions of proxy searches are considered as a form of third-order positioning (5), they allow a glimpse of the ways that close friends and family members position pregnant women: as needing information about such issues infant care and consumer products.

CONCLUSION

In a context like a North American pregnancy, in which information seeking is seen as an acceptable and, indeed, a desirable form of behaviour, it is particularly important to consider the narrower discursive context in which these particular accounts were produced. Although the excerpts quoted here are attributed only to the pregnant woman who produced them, they were produced during the course of interviews with someone who positioned herself as a "university researcher and mother of twins." Attending to the positioning of the researcher is crucial. In this case, the researcher positioned herself as an "insider" (30), someone with experiential expertise in the very context under discussion, and as someone with an interest in information

seeking behaviour: someone whom participants might expect to think of pregnancy as a time when women would or should be seeking information.

Indeed, participants were sometimes apologetic or defensive in justifying their failure actively to seek information. Rachel said, "I haven't really researched. I feel like I should be, I kind of panic, knowing that I should be doing more." Lynn reported, "I feel like I should be doing all this research. I should have a big file folder full of stuff." When participants did describe seeking information, a typical account might present a saga of active, incidental, and serendipitous information practices being repeatedly foiled by barriers beyond the information seeker's control. In some cases, the woman's creativity, persistence, and plain good luck prevailed, while in others, the quest was unsuccessful and the story accounted for the lack of success. Participants described a twin pregnancy as something rare and unusual, distinct from a "normal" pregnancy. This rarity served as a justification for not being able to find good information sources: Amina observed that "there is not a lot about twins." In addition, participants described situations when forces beyond their control made a source inaccessible. Frances described a barrier to obtaining a medical form she wanted: "They didn't have one there at the actual doctor's office." Overall, participants described barriers as insurmountable and showed both that they knew what was expected of them (finding out about twins, getting the necessary forms), and that they had good reasons for failing to meet the expectations.

Participants did, then, position themselves as people who would be needing – and should be actively seeking – information. Given this characteristic of pregnancy as an information-seeking context, one might expect that all information seeking accounts would highlight active information seeking. This was not the case. Participants' information-seeking accounts performed a variety of discursive functions, although the stories that participants' accounts told about them as information seekers did not vary substantially across descriptions of the four *modes* of information practice. I argue that, although not all accounts positioned the pregnant woman as an *active seeker*, even accounts of the more "passive" forms of information practice positioned fulfilled the discursive function of demonstrating the pregnant woman to be an

autonomous actor (32), positioning her as:

- connected [active seeking, by proxy];
- attentive to her environment, alert to unexpected possibilities, and receptive to appropriate forms of information [active scanning, everyday monitoring];
- active (even pro-active), [active seeking, active scanning];

and therefore conforming to the expected role of the pregnant woman as active information seeker (11).

Constructivist discourse analytic approaches have much to offer LIS researchers studying information seeking in context. Taking a constructivist perspective such as Potter and Wetherell's (3) form of discourse analysis or positioning theory forces the researcher to attend to the researcher-participant interaction and to the functions that accounts of information seeking perform within it. It is then possible to extend Tuominen and Savolainen's (1) work and study the kinds of discursive action taken by accounts of information seeking themselves.

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