The Construction of the Meaning and Significance of an 'Author' among Information Behaviour Researchers

A Social Constructivist Approach

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Doctor of Philosophy

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP / ORIGINALITY

I certify that this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

_____

Dedication

This Thesis is dedicated to the people whose support made it possible:

Harriet Jordan

and

Russell and Margaret Olsson

They kept faith in me, even when I doubted myself.

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Acknowledgements

If I see further, it is because I stand on the shoulders of giants.
Isaac Newton

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Abstract

This study identifies and explores the social processes that influence the construction by academic researchers of the meaning/s and significance/s of an author and her work prominent in the literature of their field. It examines the construction by 15 information behaviour researchers of Brenda Dervin and her work, using semi-structured interviewing and inductive analysis techniques.

In focussing theoretical attention on social processes, the study seeks to address critiques of prevailing approaches to information behaviour research, such as: a focus on individual cognition at the expense of social and affective factors; a construction of information users defined by their areas of ignorance and uncertainty, rather than their expertise; and a focus on purposive rather than non-purposive information behaviour.

Conceptually, the study has been influenced by a range of theoretical approaches from both information behaviour research and a variety of other disciplines, including Dervin's Sense-Making and Foucauldian discourse analysis.

The study found that participants' initial contact with the author and her work, and the subsequent important events in their relationship, occurred not because of purposeful searching, but rather 'socially' – as a part of non-purposive events and relationships related to the participants' role as academic researchers. The source most frequently discussed by participants was informal discussions with colleagues, and participants' interactions with 'author texts' were commonly mediated by their interpersonal communication. The study found that the significant influences on participants' constructive processes were people and texts with whom they had a long-term relationship.

Participants' constructions of the author and her work were an essentially social process. Their sense-making was inextricably linked to their social context/s: their interactions with their colleagues and mentors; their engagement with the literature and theories of information science and other fields; their research interests and

specialisations; and their educational and cultural backgrounds. Participants' constructive processes largely involved elaborating existing constructions – radical changes in construction were both rare and traumatic. Participants' constructions were neither objective nor wholly subjective, but intersubjective - based on shared understandings, conventions and social practices.

Participants' constructive processes had two interdependent aspects: the construction of meaning and the construction of authority (knowledge/power). Participants' informal behaviour, as well as their engagement with formal information sources, involved constructions of authority. Their constructions of the authority of their informant/s determined whether they accepted or rejected the constructions of the author conveyed to them. Participants were able to strategically use shared constructions to add to the credibility and authority of their own work