

Information Behavior Among Parents to Premature Babies

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Abstract

The primary goal of this research was to examine information behavior amongst parents to premature babies in light of McKenzie's "Two-Dimensional Information Practices Model" (McKenzie, 2003). The classic approach in the Information Science field, as described by Wilson (Wilson, 2000), describes information seeking as arising from the need to bridge a knowledge gap, suggesting that the process of information seeking is a means of finding a solution to a problem. As the research in this field has continued over time, several researchers (such as Savolainen, 2007, Ocepek, 2018, McKenzie, 2003), have contributed their voice to the development of the concept of ELIS ("Everyday Life Information Seeking behavior"). These scholars argue that the classic approach to information science disregards the cognitive component of the information seeking process, focusing solely on the problem-solving aspect. The ELIS approach sees information seeking as an ongoing process, situating the people involved as a part of a social environment and emphasizing their role in society.

The "Two-Dimensional Information Practices" model applied in this study is designed to examine information seeking behavior on information practices in everyday life, characterizing information seeking practices that are not necessarily deliberate, but random. One of the key features of this model is the focus on the stage in which the person who seeks information identifies a potential information source that they deem to be helpful, and the ways in which they choose to interact with these sources. The study presented here represents a novel use of this model, since, to date, no other studies have applied the model in incidences of information seeking under conditions that combine the stress and sense of emergency generated by premature birth.

That is, it is the first study to explore information behavior engaged in by parents while struggling to cope with a new situation that consists of significant crisis characteristics. In doing so, it enriches the original model by adding two more layers besides context: time and place.

The study employed a qualitative research approach, and semi- structured interviews as a data collection tool, as a means of eliciting and addressing the wide array of emotions, thoughts and contemplations expressed by parents regarding their premature birth experience. The original study that presented the "Two-Dimensional Information Practices" model employed the qualitative research approach as well, using semi-structured interviews with 19 Canadian women, all pregnant with twins. In the study presented here, 14 women and 5 men were interviewed, all parents to premature babies born in numerous hospitals in Israel.

The premature birth as they experienced it shaped the way in which they sought information, applying certain information practices due to the influence of the new situation created so suddenly in their lives. Premature birth can be an unexpected, emergency procedure, or an end to a prolonged period of "bed rest" (designed to maintain a difficult pregnancy as long as possible). Nevertheless: it is still a deviation from the common norm associated in the parent's mind with what is considered a "normal pregnancy". The premature birth is often an ongoing event described by the parents as a crisis, shifting them away from their day to day routine into an emergency situation taking place in an unfamiliar place and ends only after the mother and her baby are discharged from the hospital.

The questions asked during the interviews, according to the Two-Dimensional Information Practices Model, aimed to examine if and how the parent applied various information practices: How did they identify information sources? How did they approach them? Did they receive information that they weren't asking for? Did they want to hear only parts of the information delivered to them? Did they feel that they got all the necessary information? Was there any importance to the timing of the information exchange between them and the medical staff? Did the information help them to cope with new situation created in their lives?

The study demonstrated that by applying and examining the "Two-Dimensional Information Practices" model in the context of this particular situation reveals two additional factors that can influence the application of information practices: time and place. The particular characteristics of the premature birth (the crisis atmosphere, the time pressure and the hospital's stressful environment), were constantly pulsing and evident in the background throughout this experience, affecting the parents' actions and the steps they took during this time.

It thus illustrated that one cannot thoroughly examine the parents' information seeking behavior, without an elaborate description of their surroundings and atmosphere as a means of explaining their emotional state, and shedding light on their reasons for preferring certain information practices over others.

The words chosen by the participants to describe the experience of premature birth were powerful, suggesting a deep mark that was left in the minds of those who went through this experience: "emergency", "shock", "crying", "stress", "a surprise" and even "trauma" were expressions appearing in most of the interviews conducted for this research. All of these words reflect the powerful, jarring experience undergone by these parents, whose pregnancies were suddenly and prematurely ended by a medical problem. The "emergency state and crisis atmosphere" category opening the "Findings" chapter in this research is essential to grasp the emotional and cognitive state of the mothers during the premature birth experience, as the time and pressure aspects take their toll, forcing them to cope with a new situation in an unfamiliar place like the hospital. The immense load taken on by the medical staff, who are not always available to answer the parents' questions, and the medical jargon used by the staff all act as information barriers. On the opposite side, medical staff, keen to provide as much information as they can, sometimes deepened the frustration among parents who do not possess the same medical knowledge as the hospital's staff, or do not want to hear all of the scenarios that might happen: "why did he have to say that?", "I don't want to hear this right now" are just two examples of reactions to information that was conveyed at the wrong time, adding more weight to the already heavy mental burden the parents had to contend with.

The contribution of this research is the triangulation of the "context-time-place" aspects: The crisis atmosphere, medical emergency situation and the hospital's surroundings are unique characteristics that contribute to the way the "Two-Dimensional Information Practices" model was applied among parents to premature children during the premature birth experience.

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