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Social Positioning

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Social positioning theory examines the influences of contextual discursive practices on individuals' lives. This theory allows researchers to explore poststructural notions of identity construction, and is grounded in a postmodern tradition where personal identity is relative, socially constructed, contextual, and highly individual. Although research exploring information behavior is well established in library and information science, few studies have examined the influence of social discourses on individuals' actions. When discursive stereotypes inform librarians' service and policy decisions, for example, the end result may be practices that meet the needs of very few people. Social positioning theory offers a framework for the development of individualized models of service and research by facilitating the examination of social discourses within informational contexts, with a focus on the social complexities that inform individuals' information behaviors.

Social positioning theory represents a dynamic extension of role theory. Although role theory is well established in the social sciences (Greenberger & O'Neil, 1993; Menaghan, 1989), it has been criticized for its inability to examine complexities across roles. Once a woman has a child, for example, society assigns her the "mother" role and dictates certain responsibilities. While role theory exposes conflicts (e.g., between "mother" and "worker"), it ignores the interplay between roles where individuals construct new social positions (e.g., "mother-worker-spouse") by accepting or rejecting elements of each role. Social positioning theory allows for the exploration of such complexities in the development of individuals' identities.

Self-positioning was first explored in psychology, in Hollway's (1982) examination of gender differences in heterosexual relationships, and the social practices that reinforce male and female identities. Hollway (1998) has identified several discursive tenets related to the positions men and women take up (or discard) in determining gender identities:

- Discourses make available positions for individuals to take up or disregard; these positions are placed in relation to other people through the meaning a particular discourse makes available (e.g., "the woman submits to the man").
- In some cases, taking up particular positions is not equally available to all social group members (e.g., "the man submits to the woman" may not be possible given a traditional discourse).
- Practices and meanings have histories that are developed and reproduced throughout individuals' lives.

Hollway's work has evolved into social positioning theory, which posits that individuals are active developers of their identities (e.g., Davies & Harré, 1990). van Langenhove and Harré (1999) detail the modes of positioning as discursive practice:

- *First and second order positioning* – First order positioning refers to the ways individuals locate themselves and others discursively by using several categories and storylines (e.g., a younger student says to a mature student: "You remind me of my mother. Can you help me with this assignment?"; this positions the older student as helpful due to her age or mother-like qualities, not her academic abilities); second order positioning occurs when an individual questions how they have been positioned and negotiates a new position (e.g., the mature student replies: "Why? I'm not that old!").
- *Performative and accountive positioning* – Second order positioning, when occurring within the conversation with the person who has positioned another person in the first order, is called performative positioning; when second order positioning occurs with a third party (e.g., the mature student says to a friend: "That younger student wanted my help because I reminded her of her mother—can you believe that?"), this renegotiation of the position is called accountive or third order positioning.

- *Moral and personal positioning* – People can be positioned with regard to the moral orders in which they perform social actions; it is often sufficient to refer to the roles people occupy within a given moral order or to certain institutional aspects of social life to understand their positions.
- *Self and other positioning* – Within a conversation, each participant always positions the other while simultaneously positioning him or herself; in this way, positioning is a discursive practice, where individuals accept or renegotiate the positions on offer.
- *Tacit and intentional positioning* – Most first order positioning is tacit, where individuals will not position themselves or others in an intentional or even a conscious way; however, where an individual is teasing or lying to another, the first order positioning can be intentional (e.g., the younger student makes the connection to her mother to make the mature student feel uncomfortable); second and third order positionings are always intentional, especially where a tacit first order positioning has occurred.

In addition to these general modes of positioning, there are four categories of intentional positioning, where individuals actively choose discursive positions:

1) *Deliberate self-positioning* – This occurs in every conversation where one expresses his/her personal identity; the stories people tell differ according to how they want to present themselves to others.

2) *Forced self-positioning* – This differs from deliberate self-positioning in that the initiative for self-positioning lies with someone else; often, this occurs in institutions, where individuals are classified so that they may act in the way they are expected to act within the organization (e.g., a librarian asks: "Are you a student?," forcing the individual to position him/herself as a student or not a student).

3) *Deliberate positioning of others* – This occurs in either the

presence or absence of the individual being positioned; when the person is present this can take the form of a moral reproach; when the person is absent, this takes the form of gossip.

4) *Forced positioning of others* – This also occurs in either the presence or absence of the person being positioned, where a third party is forced to position him/herself in relation to the individual being positioned.

Social positioning theory has been applied in various research contexts, including health, education, and social psychology, and to improve human services (e.g., Carbaugh 1999; Sabat & Harré, 1995). In library and information science, Given (2002, 2000) first applied this theory in an examination of mature university students' social identities and academic information behaviors. This research revealed the influence of discursive positioning on students' activities and interactions with others in pursuing informational goals. The study found, for example, that tacit positioning of all university students as young high school graduates adversely affected mature students' information-seeking strategies. In addition, intentional positioning of mature students as outsiders in the classroom silenced these students in their interactions with peers and instructors—two major sources of academic information. McKenzie and Carey (2000) have since used positioning theory to explore the implications of discursive constructions of physician and patient for information-seeking. Overall, the application of this theory in library and information science remains underutilized.

Social positioning theory offers a framework to expose the effects of stereotypical presumptions on informational encounters. Although people may react quite differently to the social positions offered (from outrage and active resistance of others' perceptions, to quiet complicity), studies of these experiences can lead to service practices that best meet individuals' needs. The concrete effects of social positioning (e.g., silencing a mature student in the classroom) shape information practice. This theory adds a necessary level of complexity to information behavior research and enhances understandings of individuals' needs and the informational activities that support those needs.

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The Socio-Cognitive Theory of Users Situated in Specific Contexts and Domains

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The domain analytic theory (DA) was introduced in information science by Hjørland and Albrechtsen (1995) and Hjørland (2002a). Although DA emphasizes domains, as opposed to individuals, as units of analysis in information science, it nevertheless also has a view of users' individual cognitive processes. This view is termed *the socio-cognitive view* (cf., Hjørland, 2002b).

A basic assumption in the socio-cognitive view is that small children's cognition is mainly determined by biological principles. When children learn language and symbols the cognitive processes are increasingly mediated by signs, meaning, and symbols, which are internalized in the individual and then reprogram the way cognitive processes work. Such systems of signs and symbols are first developed externally, in a culture. They are culture-specific and partly social- and domain specific.

People's use of information may be partly biologically determined. Some people like music much more than others and therefore they use more information about music. Some people have a flair for mathematics, others try to avoid it. When we speak of people's relevance criteria in relation to IR, they are, however, mainly determined by cultural factors. They may, for example, be determined by trends or "paradigms" in knowledge domains, as demonstrated by Hjørland (2002) in psychology. When searching for literature about a topic, say schizophrenia, the relevance criteria are implied by the theory, tradition, or "paradigm" to which the searcher subscribes or belongs. Psychoanalysts prefer psychoanalytical papers, cognitivists prefer cognitivistic papers, etc. Relevance