

# **Discursive constructions in the university context: social positioning theory & mature undergraduates' information behaviours**

**Lisa M. Given**

*School of Library and Information Studies, 3-20 Rutherford South,  
University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB Canada T6G 2J4*

e-mail: lisa.given@ualberta.ca

---

This paper offers social positioning theory as a framework for examining the implications of discursive interactions on individuals' information behaviours. First, the paper outlines the role of discourse in society, including prevailing discursive constructions of 'student' identities in the university environment. Second, the paper details the central tenets of social positioning theory – a dynamic extension of role theory that allows individuals to construct personal identities from the discursive positions on offer in social contexts. Finally, the paper applies this theory to a study of mature undergraduates' information behaviours. This study used in-depth qualitative interviews to examine the lives of 25 mature undergraduates at one Canadian university. The study explored these individuals' personal identity constructions and the implications of discursive social positions on their academic information behaviours. Findings include: mature students' stifling of informational activities due to intentional positioning by peers and instructors; their frustration with assignments that dictate specific information requirements due to professors' presumptions about 'student' performance; and, their general frustration within an informational environment crafted for younger students' academic needs. The results of the study provide a framework for the application of social positioning theory to other contexts and other individuals' experiences.

## **INTRODUCTION**

University students engage in a range of information behaviours to complete their academic work. From borrowing library texts, to taking notes, to asking questions of professors, students' experiences across disciplines are linked by a common need to locate information for essays, exams and other assignments. While research exploring individuals' information-seeking behaviour is well established in library and information science – and while some research has focused on mature, international or other specialized student populations – few studies have examined the influence of social discourse on students' (or other individuals') information behaviour. Since Tuominen and Savolainen (1) identified social construction as a way to examine information use as discursive action, few studies have applied this framework to individuals' information behaviours. Chelton's (2) dissertation examined the practical implications of librarians' constructions of 'adolescent' stereotypes, while McKenzie and Carey (3) have explored the implications of discursive

constructions of 'physicians' and 'patients' on information-seeking. Given's (4) study of mature undergraduates' information behaviour revealed the influence of discursive social positioning on the ways that students located information for academic work, and their interactions with others in pursuit of informational goals. This article presents findings from this work in order to explore the value of social positioning theory as a guiding framework for examining the implications of discursive interactions on individuals' information behaviour.

### **THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF INFORMATION BEHAVIOURS**

Students engage in numerous information behaviours as they interact within the social world of university; all of these play a role in their achievement of academic success. Existing research identifies various academic information behaviours, including narrowing an essay topic, selecting appropriate databases, retrieving relevant documents, and reading and analysing documents to write formal papers (5). Typically, studies of these information behaviours focus on young undergraduates and presume common skill levels and perceptions against which all undergraduates are judged (6 and 7). Mature students, if included in these studies, are not identified; their experiences are left to those few studies that examine adults in isolation from their younger peers (8 and 9). While these latter studies do expand the field's knowledge of some adult students' needs, they also perpetuate stereotypes of typical student behaviours by placing mature students as 'other' than the norm. This approach is replicated in practice, as the presumption of a younger undergraduate student population drives the creation of library policy – such as designing reference services to meet the needs of recent high school graduates (10). As Fine points out, once "*librarians make assumptions about...users' behavior and act on those assumptions as though they are true, the reference process and the flow of useful information are impeded*" (11, p. 17). When the prevailing stereotype presumes that mature students attend school part-time while they work full-time, or that they prefer employment-related courses over theoretical studies, individual students are positioned in ways that may not match their place in the social world. When discursive stereotypes inform service and instructional choices made by educators and librarians, the end result may be practices which meet the needs of only a small minority of students. The existing literature, however, does not explore students' reactions to such stereotypical positions. While many traits are associated with adult student's experiences, there are few examples in the literature where these traits have been shown to be limiting or even false for many students' real-world experiences. As students' information behaviours occur in various social contexts (marked by interactions with professors, students,

and others), positioning theory offers a framework for examining the complexities of those behaviours, and the ways that social interactions help or hinder students' academic work.

## **DISCOURSE, IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND THE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT**

Before examining positioning theory, it is important to discuss social discourse and its place in the university context. Much research explores the social nature of organizations, and the ways that institutional discourses affect their constituents. McCarthy notes that institutions provide a social basis to thinking and cognition (12), while Mumby states that "To 'understand' what is going on [in any area of social interaction] and to participate in it in some way, one must already have understood how it is organized – whether it is a game, a conversation, a trip across town, or a board meeting. It is *that* understanding, that sense one has of how things are organized and how one fits into them, that makes human communication possible" (13, p.x). Communication structures and arranges our world, and social discourses feed our understanding of how the world is organized. The discourses at play within universities provide a basis for thinking, learning and academic success. In this context, discursive notions of the 'student' identity have concrete effects on learning – and on informational activities that support academic success. It is important to understand how individual students manage within discursive, social contexts – particularly for marginalized groups that may not conform to institutional norms.

Davies and Harré (14), Shotter (15), and Burr (16) examine social discourse in light of post-structural notions of identity construction. They note that as persons are composed of multiple selves through which they define their identities, and as these selves are the product of social interactions with many possible constructions, then "surrounding any one object, event, person, etc., there may be a variety of different discourses, each with a different story to tell about the object in question, [and] a different way of representing it to the world" (16, p. 48). These discourses are manifest in books, conversations, images, and other texts, and they construct our world by setting out what it means to be a care giver, a worker, and so on. We position ourselves socially by taking up or discarding particular components of these social positions – including the 'student' identity.

### **The 'traditional student' discourse**

At Canadian universities, the perpetuation of stereotypical discourses plays

a role in the development of mature students' identities and the information behaviour in which they engage. Images of the 'traditional student' are prevalent in society and form the broader discourse of what it means to be a university student. For example, in an annual ranking of Canadian universities by a national news magazine, university students are described as being easy to recognise on campus, with their skateboards in hand or by their modes of dress that emulate characters on the hit television show *Friends* (17). Approaches to classroom practice and the provision of academic information are grounded in these images; according to one professor at Queen's University, for example, undergraduates are used to getting their information visually, and university professors must respond by integrating Gulf War-esque images into lectures (17). Mature students are conspicuously absent from these discussions of 'student' life. These examples echo Helena Lopata's research:

*...the traditional educational system of American society, was and basically still is, designed for a young person who has gone through school with only scheduled interruptions since childhood. This applies also to higher education. Such young people are expected to live on campus or nearby and not to have competing marital and parental roles. The ideal of a university locates it in a small town in which it dominates the student's life. The student role is dominant; the [social] circle contains faculty and administrators, service providers, and fellow students organized into classes, majors and voluntary associations promoting sports, dating, and social life in general (18, p. 211).*

This normalised student discourse infuses every aspect of university life. It forms the basis of institutional documents and is part of the hierarchical hegemony of university that discourages questioning of prevailing norms. This normalisation occurs in the form of common assignments and library practices which expect (and dictate) a level of sameness, and which were created with the 'normal' student in mind. Orientation sessions include financial management workshops for students away from home for the first time and seminars on responsible drinking. There are few informational sessions that discuss day-care, family time management strategies, or other issues of potential concern to mature students. Not only must mature students fight the academic, financial and other struggles that all students face, they must also find a place for themselves within the normative practices of the institution.

### **The 'adult learner' discourse**

In addition to reconciling their experiences with the norm, mature students

also face a competing discursive position – the stereotypical ‘adult learner’. This position is grounded in educational research that has created a formalized theory of adult learning (andragogy) that includes vast lists of student characteristics, educational needs, and barriers that impede success (19). Knowles (20), Kidd (21), Boud (22), Foot (23) and others, define adult learners by particular traits, including a desire to have their working lives reflected in their courses, and a high level of classroom participation. Glass and Harshberger (24), Solmon and Gordon (19), Bryant (25), Home (26) and others have used andragogy to examine the efficacy of classroom practice and support services for adult students.

Andragogy also informs library and information science research, particularly regarding reference and instructional practice. Researchers and practitioners, including Sheridan (27), Keenan (9), Coughlan (8), Tomaiuolo (10), Vakili (28), and Lockerby (29), use andragogy to examine information services and suggest changes that best meet adult students’ needs. While these studies provide insight into the institutional barriers adult learners face, this discursive position obscures what it means to live as a mature student. Such studies do not reveal the daily experiences of adult students within an environment constructed for typical undergraduates. The mature student may, for example, feel excluded from informational activities (such as library tours or research groups) due to conflicting family commitments. Although the barriers that define adult learners’ experiences frequently serve as the basis for library policy (27, 28), little is known about the effects of discursive stereotypes on these students’ informational needs.

It is important to note that while library and information science continues to apply andragogical principles to the needs of adult students, current educational research questions the efficacy of ‘adult’ labels as they relate to students’ educational needs. The work of Briton (30), Usher, *et al.* (31), Usher and Edwards (32), and Collins (33) is representative of new approaches that attempt to break existing stereotypes. The study reported here takes this approach by examining social positioning and the implications for mature students’ informational activities.

### **SOCIAL POSITIONING THEORY – AN OVERVIEW**

Social positioning theory examines the influence of contextual discursive practices on individuals’ lives. For library and information science researchers, this theory offers a dynamic approach to the examination of discourse within informational environments and the implications for individuals’ information behaviour. Social positioning theory has been

applied in various research contexts – including health, education, and social psychology – to improve human services by examining contextual discursive practices (34, 35, 36).

Social positioning represents a dynamic extension of role theory. While role theory is well established in the social sciences (37, 38), it has recently been critiqued for its inability to examine complexities across roles. Once a woman has a child, for example, society assigns her the ‘mother’ role and dictates particular responsibilities. While this theory is useful for exposing conflicting life roles (e.g., ‘mother’ and ‘worker’), it ignores the interplay between roles which allows individuals to construct new social positions (e.g., ‘mother-worker-spouse’) by accepting or rejecting elements of those roles.

The act of self-positioning was first explored in Hollway’s doctoral work in psychology (39); she explored gender differences in heterosexual relationships in order to examine the social practices that reinforce ‘male’ and ‘female’ identities. Hollway identified several discursive tenets related to the positions men and women take up (or discard) in determining their 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 a particular position is not equally available to all social group members (e.g. ‘the man submits to the woman’ is not possible given the traditional discourse);*
- *practices and meanings have histories which are developed and reproduced through the lives of individuals; those individuals choose their positions, even the ones that match the prevailing discourse (40, pp. 236-237).*

This dynamic approach has evolved, under Davies and Harré (14), Harré and van Langenhove (41) and others, into social positioning theory that posits that individuals are active developers of their identities. Van Langenhove and Harré (42, pp. 20-22) detail the many modes of positioning as discursive practice:

1. *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, rather than her academic abilities); second order positioning occurs when the first order positioning is not accepted by one of the persons involved in the discussion; one person questions the way they have been positioned and negotiates a new position (e.g. the mature student replies: 'Why? I'm not that old!');

2. Performative and accountive positioning: *Second order positioning, when it occurs 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 referred to as 'accountive' or third order positioning;*
3. 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;*
4. Self and other positioning: *Within a conversation, each of the participants always positions the other while simultaneously positioning him or herself; in this way, positioning is a discursive practice, where individuals can accept or renegotiate the positions on offer in the social discourse;*
5. Tacit and intentional positioning: *Most first order positioning is of a tacit kind, where individuals will not position themselves or others in an intentional or even a conscious way; but, where an individual is teasing or lying to the other person, the first order positioning can be intentional (e.g. if the younger student makes the connection to her mother as a way to make the mature student feel uncomfortable in the classroom); second and third order positioning is always intentional, especially where a tacit first order positioning has occurred (42).*

In addition to these general modes of positioning, Langenhove and Harré also explore four categories of intentional positioning, where individuals actively choose a discursive position:

1. Deliberate self-positioning: *This occurs in every conversation where one wants to express his or her personal identity; thus, the stories people tell about themselves will 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 that 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 a member of a different group);*

3. Deliberate positioning of others: *This can be done 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 gossiping;*
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 (42).*

In all of these modes, individuals act as agents of their identity constructions; they position themselves by taking up or discarding elements of available discourses. In the study reported here, all forms of positioning were detailed by the interviewees; excerpts of these discussions are explored in the sections that follow.

## **THE STUDY – BACKGROUND & PROCEDURES**

The findings reported here are from a dissertation designed to explore the social construction of stereotypical student identities; examine mature undergraduates' student identities (and their influence on academic success); and document the influence of socially constructed student identities on mature students' information behaviours (4). The findings are examined in light of social positioning theory to explore the ways that mature students interact with available discourses – and the implications for their information behaviour.

The study examined the lives of 25 mature undergraduates (21 and older, and outside of education for at least three years) at one Canadian university. Restricting the study to one site offered many benefits: common informational services and resources; a shared context for academic requirements; and a common social context for examining student identity. Data were collected in the fall of 1998 using in-depth qualitative interviews (each approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes). Interviewees were contacted at a mature student orientation session, by notices posted across campus, and using a snowball technique. Interviewees were selected using maximum variation sampling to achieve a broad representation of gender, age, discipline, family status, employment background, and previous education. The 16 women and nine men ranged in age from 23 to 55, and had varied personal and academic interests. Ten interviewees were married, 15 were single, and 13 had children. Nineteen of the interviewees were



employed, and all engaged in unpaid work outside of the home (e.g., coaching). Sixteen students were enrolled full-time (nine part-time), in disciplines spanning the social sciences, arts, sciences and visual arts.

The interview questions addressed students' personal and professional lives, educational backgrounds, academic interests, perceptions of student identities, and information-seeking strategies. The data analysis used a grounded theory approach, with emergent themes coded into *Ethnograph*. Prior to final analysis the codebook was scrutinized by six independent coders, with an average agreement of 94%. The analyzed themes crossed many topics including academic success, traditional and unconventional information sources, and the effect of identity formation on information behaviours. This article focuses on those themes related to how these students were positioned while completing their academic work and the implications for their information behaviours.

### **INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN – TACIT POSITIONING OF THE 'TRADITIONAL STUDENT' DISCOURSE**

Essays, exams and other projects form the basis of most students' academic information behaviours. The design of assignments and instructional materials, however, is dependent (at least in part) on instructors' discursive constructions of their students. Tacit positioning of all university students as 'traditional' was a prevalent theme in the interviews – and one that had a negative impact on many of the interviewees' information-seeking strategies. Many interviewees, for example, believed that professors lowered academic standards to match a perceived lack of commitment on the part of younger students. Xena, for example, noticed younger students' lack of work and discussed the ways that her professors tried to counter this trend:

I've noticed people coming to tests and saying 'Oh, I haven't even opened my books yet', and bragging about it. And I don't understand that. My English prof. is getting frustrated right now...he's like 'If you don't have your book here, you might as well not even be here'. And I know he's not talking to me. And I know when he says 'You should have had the reading done by now, and I know most of you haven't', I know he's not talking to me. Because I know I've gotten all of this done. But it scares the rest of them that he says that. And they need to be given a little bit of reality and shaken up a bit. Because, on average, the younger first year students just aren't motivated.

As Xena believed that the professor's perception did not include her, she positioned herself as atypical – a serious student – and was not bothered by this act of positioning. For other interviewees, however, setting standards for younger students was frustrating and antithetical to intellectual growth. Some course assignments, for example, were crafted to counter the perceived prevalence of cheating, requiring all students to locate specific

information to complete their work. Bonnie described one example:

We had a research essay and we were to pick a topic we liked. So I picked [one], I started my research, and then last week the professor put a twist on the assignment. Now we have to take a communications slant on the subject. And that doesn't work with my topic at all. So now I have to find something else, and I've wasted a lot of time looking for information. Had I known before... I mean, he just put this twist on it last week. And the reason he gave was that he didn't want us to buy a paper from an internet essay-writing service. He warned us about that and said we would get a zero. And he said 'It would be impossible for you to find an internet essay with a communications twist on it. That's part of the reason I'm doing this'. Had I known about that twist, in advance, I would have chosen a different topic. And maybe the younger students find that easy, to pick a topic, but I don't. That, to me, is a major job. And now, having to change it and find new information has been really frustrating. I accept the reason he gave... But as an adult I found that insulting. That he would think that I would go and buy an essay? No, I wouldn't.

Bonnie positioned herself as an adult, different from the norm espoused by the professor, and was frustrated by the additional information-seeking required to meet the new assignment requirements. She resented the fact that she needed to invest extra time to find information for her project, due to the professor's positioning of students' as prone to cheating.

Zoe was also frustrated with professors' attempts to position her alongside her less dedicated peers; she described the impact of assignment design on her own intellectual needs:

I feel indignant because I realize that many assignments are designed for the younger students, who don't do their reading. I mean, I've been in courses where you had to hand in a one-page paper, once a week. You know, condense a 5 or 10 page article into one page. I mean, all I'm doing there is proving to the professor that I've actually read it. There's nothing meaningful in it for me... And I think that mature students are at university because they've chosen to be there. And therefore they take their subject matter far more seriously, and will have read the assignment without having to prove it. Or, without needing to prove it. But that's not the perspective you hear in class.

Zoe positioned herself as a serious, mature student – atypical of the student body. This self-positioning increased her information-seeking behaviours, as she sought her own meaning of the coursework through reading supplementary materials and writing papers for which she did not receive academic credit.

For other interviewees, tacit positioning had an impact on informational interactions with instructors. John, for example, described his experiences in an introductory psychology course with a class size of 1500 students that required teaching assistants to coordinate study groups. John described his frustration with his teaching assistant's apparent inability to address atypical student needs:

Psych 020 is entirely geared for younger students. Like, this TA was organizing a study group for the exam. So I e-mailed him to be included and he sent back and wanted to know what residence I was living in so he could connect me with a group. So I e-mailed him back and said 'I don't live in residence. I live out in the country, and I'm a mature student'. And I never heard from him again! That was it. And I've e-mailed him again too, and nothing. No response.

Study groups play vital roles in students' information behaviour; they provide opportunities for students to share resources, study and engage in other informational activities. For such opportunities to be designed with particular student positions in mind raises problems for any student not matching the prevailing norm. While John's experience was the result of tacit positioning (and the teaching assistant's inability to address atypical needs), other interviewees' experiences reflected intentional positioning that hampered their informational activities. The next section details some of these experiences.

### **THE CLASSROOM AS INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT – EFFECTS OF INTENTIONAL POSITIONING**

The university classroom is a primary information-seeking venue for all students; it offers an open environment for sharing course-related information and asking questions of professors. This interaction, however, makes the classroom one of the most active environments for social positioning – as students are discursively positioned by classmates and instructors while seeking information. As many of the interviewees' experiences did not match (or matched only some elements of) the 'adult learner' discourse, being socially positioned as 'mature' had a strong (and frequently negative) impact on in-class information behaviours.

One of the most common examples was younger students' intentional positioning of mature students as parent figures – 'old fogeys' who did not have equal rights to speak in class. While some interviewees engaged in class discussions, others chose not to participate due to the ways they were positioned by the group. The interviewees recounted instances where they felt too intimidated to speak due to peers' or professors' disdainful attitudes – forcing them to stifle questions or comments. Even older students who had experienced different cultures, and who usually felt comfortable speaking in groups, were silenced in the classroom. Peter made the following comment about mature students' desire to participate, and his fears at doing so:

I get the sense that the other mature students are like I am. They... seem to want to participate. Well... some are very quiet. All semester you might not hear a peep out of them, in terms of asking or answering a question. You know... I'll get up in front of a group of people and think 'Yeah, I may be wrong, but what the hell. I'm going to ask a question'. But I think the fact that the class is really young makes a difference. If I answer a question wrong, I don't try to show it, but I feel really dumb. I have visions of them thinking 'Oh yeah, there's an old guy. He's been around for a long time and he can't even get that question right. Why doesn't he just shut up?'. And sometimes I'll just say it anyway, and think 'Oh, to hell with you guys! Think whatever you want'. But there may be people who are here as mature students who prefer to retreat or think 'If I don't say anything, I'll be okay'. And it may not matter if they don't, except where a component of the grade is based on participation.

While Peter saw a link between participation and grades, it is also important to note the general value of participation as an information behaviour. Class participation affords students the chance to ask questions or expand on issues raised in class texts. This interaction benefits all students and is an important source of academic information.

Tony noted that being seen as 'the old guy' often kept him from participating – and left him with many unanswered questions. Here, he notes his own reaction to others' intentional positioning of him as a mature student – and the prevalence of social withdrawal among other mature students:

Where there are hundreds of 19-year-old students, it's not easy to put your hand up. I don't want to draw attention to myself. I almost don't want to participate at a certain intellectual level and have other students be like 'Well, the old guy knows it'. And I shouldn't care about that, but I do. Maybe it's my own insecurity, but it must be rampant insecurity because a lot of the older students seem to feel like I do. They participate to varying degrees. Your age does not go unnoticed.

The decision to stifle one's intellectual curiosity has dramatic implications for academic success. Intentional positioning that silences groups in the classroom (and removes informational opportunities) has a deleterious effect on students' work. In another of Tony's classes, the professor made note of the problems of intentional silencing and offered an ultimatum to the class. Here, Tony describes the potential value of this approach for giving mature students a voice – and the freedom to safely re-position themselves in front of their peers:

I have one professor who offers unconditional support to the female students in the class. But he's really geared that to the high school students. He said right from the beginning, 'Female students are less likely to participate. Maybe in high school you teased a girl or something. It does happen. But I'll be all over any male student who jumps on a female student.' And that was really good! I was so impressed with that. And I think it opened up the doors for a lot of people in terms of safety... so they felt they could speak out. But he needed to say that for mature students too.

Younger students were not the only ones that intentionally positioned mature students in the classroom. The interviewees also described the ways their professors' acts of positioning, resulting in mature students' withdrawal from participation and other information-seeking venues (e.g., office hours). Valerie, for example, found that while the younger students viewed her maturity as the reason she was taken seriously in the classroom, she believed that being a mature student discredited her academic achievement in the eyes of her professors. Here, she dismisses the younger students' perceptions and re-positions herself as an engaged learner who is not always taken seriously – despite her desire to be judged on merit:

Younger students look at me and say 'You always get taken seriously'. But I question that, because I don't actually. There are lots of professors who think 'Oh, here's a housewife. Nothing better to do with her time. She's back here at school and now I've got to put up with her'. So, the other day,

this girl said that right out in class. We were doing critiques of our artwork and I had done a piece with another girl, who happened to be my age. But... it was because we were taking our project seriously. And we were dressed appropriately for the session. And this younger girl was not. But she assumed that because I'm older, that I have some great pearl of knowledge that the younger students don't have... So I either get that level of respect, where people don't want to get to know me because they're making assumptions about me, or there's no respect at all... I don't really have an opportunity to show people who I am as a student.

These examples, and their implications for mature students' personal interactions, are noteworthy given that the image of a silenced or disadvantaged mature student conflicts with the 'adult learner' discourse. Mature students are positioned as more articulate and self-confident than their younger peers, and therefore believed to participate at a higher level (23). It is important to note that the discursive generalisation of high participation levels not fit the experiences of most students interviewed in this study – and had a negative impact on their information seeking within the classroom.

#### **RE-POSITIONED MATURE STUDENTS – AGENTS OF RESISTANCE & COMPLIANCE**

Interwoven in these examples of tacit and intentional positioning are the students' active responses to how they are socially positioned on campus. While the students reacted quite differently to the social positions on offer – from outrage and active resistance of others' perceptions, to quiet complicity – their experiences reflect the central tenets of social positioning theory. This adds a level of complexity to mature students' information behaviours that has not previously been documented in the literature. Despite their individual approaches to the ways that they were discursively positioned, the implications for the interviewees' information behaviours were striking. The concrete effects of social positioning – in silencing a mature student in the classroom or causing them to seek additional information to meet criteria set for traditional students' needs –shape both educational and informational practice.

This study shows that a reliance on discursive social positions is insufficient to meet individual students' needs. By dispelling traditional stereotypes, which have informed educational and library policy for decades, researchers and practitioners may reassess information behaviours (and service options) for a range of user populations. Social positioning theory offers a framework for examining tacit and intentional discursive constructions – to expose the effects of stereotypical presumptions on informational encounters and suggest service practices that will benefit individuals' daily experiences.

## REFERENCES

1. TUOMINEN, K. and SAVOLAINEN, R. A social constructionist approach to the study of information use as discursive action. In: P. Vakkari, R. Savolainen, and B. Dervin, eds. *Information seeking in context: proceedings of an international conference on research in information needs, seeking and use in different contexts, 14-16 August, 1996, Tampere, Finland*. London: Taylor Graham, 1996, 81-96.
2. CHELTON, M.K. *Adult-adolescent service encounters: the library context*. Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1997.
3. MCKENZIE, P.J. and CAREY, R.F. 'What's wrong with that woman?' – Positioning theory and information-seeking behaviour. In: A. Kublik, ed. *CAIS 2000: dimensions of a global information science: proceedings of the 28th annual conference of the Canadian Association for Information Science, Edmonton AB*. Edmonton: University of Alberta, 2000. Available at: <http://www.slis.ualberta.ca/cais2000/mckenzie.htm>
4. GIVEN, L.M. *The social construction of the 'mature student' identity: effects and implications for academic information behaviours*. Ph.D. diss., The University of Western Ontario, 2000.
5. LECKIE, G. Desperately seeking citations: uncovering faculty assumptions about the undergraduate research process. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 22 (3), 1996, 201-208.
6. JACOBSON, T. and FUSANI, D. Computer, system, and subject knowledge in novice searching of a full-text, multifile database. *Library and Information Science Research*, 14, 1992, 97-106.
7. NASH, S. and CHUNG WILSON, M. Value-added bibliographic instruction: teaching students to find the right citations. *Reference Services Review*, 19 (1), 1991, 87-92.
8. COUGHLAN, J. The BI librarian's new constituency: adult independent learners. *The Reference Librarian*, 24, 1989, 159-173.
9. KEENAN, L.M. Andragogy off-campus: the library's role. *The Reference Librarian*, 24, 1989, 147-158.
10. TOMAIUOLO, N.G. Reconsidering bibliographic instruction for adult reentry students: emphasizing the practical. *Reference Services Review*, 18 (1), 1990, 49-54.
11. FINE, S. Reference and resource: the human side. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 21 (1), 1995, 17-20.
12. MCCARTHY, E.D. *Knowledge as culture: the new sociology of knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1996.
13. MUMBY, D.K. *Communication and power in organizations: discourse, ideology, and domination*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1988.
14. DAVIES, B. and HARRÉ, R. Positioning: the discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20 (1), 1990, 43-63.
15. SHOTTER, J. Social accountability and the social construction of 'you'. In: J. Shotter and K. J. Gergen, eds. *Texts of identity*. London: Sage Publications, 1989, 133-151.
16. BURR, V. *An introduction to social constructionism*. London: Routledge, 1995.
17. JOHNSTON, A.D. Measuring excellence: from the crucible of underfunding, heroes have emerged. *Maclean's*, 111 (47), 1998, 30-33.
18. LOPATA, H.Z. *Circles and settings: role changes of American women*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1994.
19. SOLMON, L.C. and GORDON, J.J. *The characteristics and needs of adults in postsecondary education*. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1981.
20. KNOWLES, M. *The adult learner: a neglected species*. 4th ed. Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1990.
21. KIDD, J.R. *How adults learn*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Cambridge, 1978.

22. BOUD, D. Some competing traditions in experiential learning. In: S. Warner Weil and I. McGill, eds. *Making sense of experiential learning: diversity in theory and practice*. Milton Keynes: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 1989, 38-49.
23. FOOT, D.K. *Boom, bust & echo: how to profit from the coming demographic shift*. Toronto: Macfarlane, Walter & Ross, 1996.
24. GLASS, J.C., Jr. and HARSHBERGER, R.F. The full-time, middle-aged adult student in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education*, 45 (3), 1974, 211-218.
25. BRYANT, R. Why does being a mature student have to be so painful? *Adults Learning*, 6 (9), 1995, 270-271.
26. HOME, A.M. Predicting role conflict, overload and contagion in adult women university students with families and jobs. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48 (2), 1998, 85-97.
27. SHERIDAN, J. Andragogy: a new concept for academic librarians. *Research Strategies*, 4 (4), 1986, 156-167.
28. VAKILI, M.J. Revamping a required BI course for adult students. *Research Strategies*, 11 (1), 1993, 24-32.
29. LOCKERBY, R. Teaching library skills to the adult student. In: C.J. Jacob, ed. *The seventh off-campus library services conference proceedings, 25-27 October, 1995, San Diego, California*. Mount Pleasant, MI: Central Michigan University, 1995, 247-256.
30. BRITON, D. *The modern practice of adult education: a postmodern critique*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.
31. USHER, R., BRYANT, I. and JOHNSTON, R. *Adult education and the postmodern challenge: learning beyond the limits*. London: Routledge, 1997.
32. USHER, R. and EDWARDS, R. *Postmodernism and education*. London: Routledge, 1994.
33. COLLINS, M. Critical returns: from andragogy to lifelong education. In: S. Scott, B. Spencer, and A. Thomas, eds. *Learning for life: Canadian readings in adult education*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc, 1998, 46-58.
34. SABAT, S.R. and HARRÉ, R. The construction and deconstruction of self in Alzheimer's disease. *Ageing and society*, 12, 1995, 443-61.
35. BERMAN, L. Positioning in the formation of a 'national' identity. In: R. Harré and L. van Langenhove, eds. *Positioning theory: moral contexts of intentional action*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, 138-159.
36. CARBAUGH, D. Positioning as display of cultural identity. In: R. Harré and L. van Langenhove, eds. *Positioning theory: moral contexts of intentional action*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, 160-177.
37. GREENBERGER, E. and O'NEIL, R. Spouse, parent, worker: role commitments and role-related experiences in the construction of adults' well-being. *Developmental Psychology*, 29 (2), 1993, 181-197.
38. MENAGHAN, E.G. Role changes and psychological well-being: variations in effects by gender and role repertoire. *Social Forces*, 67 (3), 1989, 693-714.
39. HOLLWAY, W. *Identity and gender difference in adult social relations*. Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1982.
40. HOLLWAY, W. Gender difference and the production of subjectivity. In: J. Henriques, et al., eds. *Changing the subject: psychology, social regulation, and subjectivity*. London: Routledge, 1998, 227-263.
41. HARRÉ, R. and VAN LANGENHOVE, L., eds. *Positioning theory: moral contexts of intentional action*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.
42. VAN LANGENHOVE, L. and HARRÉ, R. Introducing positioning theory. In: R. Harré and L. van Langenhove, eds. *Positioning theory: moral contexts of intentional action*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, 14-31.

