



“I'm in sheer survival mode”: Information behaviour and affective experiences of early career academics

Rebekah Willson^{a,*}, Lisa M. Given^b

^a School of Information Studies, McGill University, 3661 Peel St, Montreal H3A 1X1, Canada

^b Faculty of Health, Arts and Design, Swinburne University of Technology, PO Box 218, Hawthorn 3122, VIC, Australia



ABSTRACT

Affect plays an important role in the information behavior of early career academics. While there is a recognition of the importance of affect to information behavior in the information science literature, there has been a lack of empirical research that details its influence. Using a constructivist grounded theory methodology, early career academics were followed for a 5- to 7-month period and data were collected using in-depth and brief, ‘check-in’ interviews. Three prominent aspects of early career academics’ affective experiences are described and their connection to specific information behavior is discussed, including feelings of: stress (linked to prioritization, information nonuse, information avoidance, and information seeking from colleagues); frustration (linked to prioritization and decision making to discontinue, persevere, or change tactics); and, stability and belonging (linked to comparison as a way of using information, seeking help, building information relationships, and sharing information with colleagues).

1. Introduction

Higher education is a knowledge-intensive and complex sector, requiring detailed information and robust seeking strategies to be successful in the job. There has been increasing attention paid to the stress and burnout experienced by academics, particularly early in their careers (e.g., Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008; Murray, 2008; Shin & Jung, 2014). Academics are dealing with increasing workloads, ongoing audits of their teaching, research and service activities, and job insecurity, alongside decreasing resources (e.g., Acker & Webber, 2017). Early career academics – typically defined as being within the first five years of completing their PhDs (Bosanquet, Mailey, Matthews, & Lodge, 2017; Hemmings, 2012) – are in a period of intense learning and transition. The transition to their work role, post-PhD, involves socialization into academia (e.g., Ponjuan, Conley, & Trower, 2011), including development of a new professional identity, taking on new profession roles, as well as overcoming the challenges of starting a new job. Many early career academics (ECAs) have emerging or poorly-defined identities as researchers, as well as lack of understanding of their research skills (e.g. Hemmings, 2012). Also, having worked under close supervision of established researchers as a doctoral student, ECAs must make the transition to being independent scholars, a shift that starts during doctoral studies (e.g. Baker & Pifer, 2011). This shift is associated with the many new roles ECAs undertake, including (for example) writing grants applications, preparing class lectures, and serving on university committees. Each of these new tasks create new

information needs and require new learning.

The period of transition from university study to one's first professional work experience is a time of upheaval, with many changes occurring, simultaneously. These changes may include personal relocation (whether to a new institution, city, and/or country) and a reframing of personal identity, alongside the adoption of new work roles with increased responsibility. Academic work requires disciplinary knowledge and expertise, and takes place within complex, knowledge-intensive organizations with complicated policy, procedural, and regulatory environments. At the same time, there are many mundane aspects of university work environments that require practical information and social support to successfully navigate the space. The titular quote “I'm in sheer survival mode” was how Evelyn, an academic in the social sciences, described juggling her research, teaching, and service work. Evelyn's quote illustrates how ECAs in this study described their work lives, overall; the concept of “survival” foregrounds how participants' work-related information behavior is tightly linked to affective experiences in the workplace, with implications for mentoring and developing junior colleagues for workplace readiness in the modern university. Evelyn's quote provides a glimpse of just one of the many participants' experiences explored in this paper.

1.1. Problem statement

The high-pressure nature of academia is evident in recent research about the stress, burnout, and mental health issues experienced by PhD

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: rebekah.willson@mcgill.ca (R. Willson).

students and academics (e.g., Barry, Woods, Warnecke, Stirling, & Martin, 2018; Kinman, 2016; Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017; Shin & Jung, 2014). In starting their first continuing academic positions, early career academics undergo what is frequently a stressful and overwhelming workplace transition. While there have been calls to focus on affective aspects of information behavior (e.g., Julien & Fourie, 2015; Julien, McKechnie, & Hart, 2005), there is a lack of empirical research that addresses the ways in which emotions and feelings influence the ways individuals find, share, and use information. Previous research has demonstrated that negative emotions can adversely influence information seeking (Ford, Miller, & Moss, 2001; Heinström, 2005); therefore, it is important to examine the influence of affect on the information behavior of academics. A greater understanding of the influence of affect on information behavior could also inform those working in universities about how to best provide information and support to early career academics to help them in their academic work. In exploring the information behavior of early career academics' transition from doctoral studies to their first academic positions, this research addressed the following research question: How do the affective experiences of early career academics influence the information they need and how they find, share, and use information in their academic work?

2. Literature review

2.1. Information behavior of academics

Academic work is complex and takes place in information-intensive environments. All academics – whether new PhD students or senior professors – require large amounts of information from diverse sources to undertake their work. Many graduate students have limited information-seeking skills and knowledge about relevant research-related sources, with undergraduate studies having not adequately prepared them for doctoral work (Catalano, 2013). Doctoral research and the ways in which PhD students work are particular to this degree path (Fleming-May & Yuro, 2009), yet students often receive little training in the information-related aspects of research (Fleming-May & Yuro, 2009; Sadler & Given, 2007). However, doctoral students' search skills and ways of searching improve over time, using an increasing number of diverse databases, primary sources, and scholarly materials overall (Green & Macauley, 2007).

During their programs, doctoral students also undergo processes of socialization into academic work (Austin & McDaniels, 2006). Supervisors are sources of information and provide advice on source selection (Catalano, 2013; Fleming-May & Yuro, 2009; Vezzosi, 2009), on how to search (George et al., 2006), and on the process of engaging in doctoral research (Al-Muomen, Morris, & Maynard, 2012). Graduate students also frequently consult their peers (Catalano, 2013), discussing ideas, key authors and resources, and, at times, sharing resources (George et al., 2006). Graduate students also ask questions of their peers that they will not ask their supervisors or librarians, for fear that they will look inept (Sadler & Given, 2007). Other people's experiences (e.g., academics beyond the supervisory team) are also important resources for students at every stage throughout the research process (Vezzosi, 2009).

Academics require large amounts of information to conduct research, to draft publications, to maintain currency, and to prepare classroom lectures (Rupp-Serrano & Robbins, 2013). They find the complex information they require using various information sources relevant to their discipline, including websites, databases, and online journals (Baruchson-Arbib & Bronstein, 2007; Ge, 2010; Rupp-Serrano & Robbins, 2013), as well as networks of colleagues (e.g., Baruchson-Arbib & Bronstein, 2007; Bronstein, 2007; Case & Given, 2016; Chu, 1999; Meho & Tibbo, 2003; Miller, 2015; Westbrook, 2003). However, in making the move from doctoral studies to the workplace, ECAs are also faced with new work-related challenges that create specific

information needs. These challenges include: not understanding job requirements (Mullen & Forbes, 2000; Murray, 2008; Sutherland, 2015) or what "counts" for tenure (Greene et al., 2008); having an incomplete picture of academia and their place within it (Bosetti, Kawalilak, & Patterson, 2008); and, not having realistic expectations of academic work, particularly workloads (Murray, 2008). Added to these challenges, ECAs are under significant time constraints due to teaching deadlines (Hemmings, 2012; Laudel & Gläser, 2008; Murray, 2008) and service commitments (Greene et al., 2008; Murray, 2008), leaving little time for research (Laudel & Gläser, 2008; Murray, 2008). It is in this environment that ECAs must work, taking on new roles and establishing themselves as independent scholars.

2.2. Affect and information behavior

Within information science, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of affect and emotion in information behavior. While there is no commonly agreed definition (Dervin & Reinhard, 2007; Mulligan & Scherer, 2012), emotion generally refers to "a relatively brief episode of coordinated brain, autonomic, and behavioral changes that facilitate a response to an external or internal event" (Davidson, Scherer, & Goldsmith, 2003, p. xiii). Affect is frequently differentiated from emotion as the conscious experience of emotion, whereas emotion is the unconscious occurrence (Albright, 2010). However, affect can also be considered broadly to include "emotion, mood, preference, and evaluation" (Julien et al., 2005, p. 454). Affect was a component in early information behavior models such as in Wilson's General Model (Wilson, 1981), Dervin's sense-making research (Dervin, 1983, 1999), and Kuhlthua's Information Search Processing Model (Kuhlthau, 1991). While much of the information behavior research has focused on cognition, these early models laid the groundwork for exploration of affect (Fisher & Landry, 2007) and the shift to an 'affective paradigm' to understand the meaning and response of individuals to information (Albright, 2010). Nahl & Bilal's, 2007 book, *Information and Emotion*, demonstrates a significant shift to a conscious focus on affect in the field, with more recent studies examining affect and emotions during discrete episodes of online information seeking, often in laboratory environments (e.g., Arapakis, Lalmas, Cambazoglu, Marcos, & Jose, 2014; Lopatovska, 2014). Overall, however, studies that address affect continue to be in the minority in the field.

Emotion's influence on information behavior is also critical to explore as it extends beyond discrete episodes: it exists before and after information seeking and influences people in multiple and complicated ways. Savolainen (2014) reviewed the research literature on emotions as motivators for information seeking, demonstrating that emotions and feelings prompt information seeking in multiple ways (starting, expanding, limiting, and terminating), but also lead to information avoidance. Affect can also be understood as both a motivation for and a product of information processes (Fisher & Landry, 2007). Research also demonstrates that information behavior is accompanied by a wide range of emotions and affective experiences. Pettigrew (2000) found affective aspects to information sharing between healthcare practitioners and patients, including the importance of trust and provision of information in a caring way to the reception of information. Fisher and Landry (2007) explored the range of emotions (positive to negative) experienced by stay-at-home mothers, with irritation and frustration frequently resulting from information processes, while worry and concern prompted information seeking. Given (2007) investigated the broad spectrum of emotions experienced by mature undergraduate students at both systemic and personal levels, with negative emotions adversely affecting and positive emotions supporting information behavior. Additionally, emotions can also be conceptualized as more than a state of being with influence on a situation, task, or individual: they can be a source of information in and of themselves (Dervin & Reinhard, 2007; Godbold, 2013; Julien et al., 2005). The interaction of affect and information behavior is an important topic that requires further study.

3. Research design

3.1. Methodology

This research is part of a larger dissertation project that used constructivist grounded theory methodology. This methodology provides a framework for data collection and analysis, and results in a theory that is grounded in the data that emerge from analysis (Charmaz & Bryant, 2008). Data collection included in-depth qualitative interviews and brief ‘check-ins’ conducted with each participant. Ethics approval was received from Charles Sturt University prior to the start of data collection. Data were audio-recorded and transcribed, with research journals and memos used to document progression of the research and emergent findings. This reflective process formed the first stage of analysis and revealed the need to recruit more participants, with theoretical sampling used to gather data that contributed to the development of analytic categories (Charmaz, 2008). Saturation was reached at the end of one year as well-established patterns and themes emerged.

3.2. Participants

Participants were early career academics from Australia and Canada who: 1) were in the humanities or social sciences; 2) had been in full-time doctoral studies; 3) had received a PhD within the last four years; 4) were employed in a full-time continuing academic position; and, 5) were in the first two years of starting their academic positions. Maximum variation and convenience sampling were used to identify participants with a wide variety of backgrounds and disciplines. Participants were recruited through emails sent directly to academics' university accounts and emails distributed through academic departments. Participants included 20 academics – 10 from Australia and 10 from Canada – who were working in 10 different universities. The sample included eight women and 12 men ranging in age from 29 to early 50s. Disciplinary backgrounds included: business, history, art history, education, philosophy, information science, political science, law, psychology, and sociology. All participants were given pseudonyms.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

As the experiences and activities of academics change throughout the year, each participant was followed for a period of five to seven months. Data collection began and ended with in-depth, semi-structured interviews, lasting 45–90 minutes. Initial interviews were conducted in person; follow-up interviews were conducted over Skype. Interviews were broad ranging, exploring many aspects of early career academics' information behavior (see Table 1 for representative questions from the initial interview). To capture significant experiences as they happened, “check-ins” were used to follow up with all participants. Check-ins, a method adapted from McKenzie (2001), consisted of brief

contact in the form of a modified journal entry created by the participant or a phone interview with the researcher, using prompts (see Table 1 for representative check-in prompts). As ECAs recruited for this study had very busy schedules (making regular contact difficult) they were offered the option of conducting check-ins using private blogs, email, Skype, or telephone.

Using constructivist grounded theory, data were coded inductively in two rounds. Initial coding consisted of line-by-line coding of print transcripts using verbs to highlight meaning (Charmaz, 2014). During initial coding, strong affective elements of participants' information work emerged. A code list was kept, along with memos to develop theoretical codes and emergent themes. Focused coding was conducted using NVivo to develop concrete themes and sub-themes. The focused codes that were developed, which were later grouped into the theme of “affect” included: busyness, being overwhelmed, stressed, frustrated, instability, stability, survival, belonging, hopefulness, enjoyment, and luck. These codes were then examined in relation to early career academics' descriptions of their information behavior. The constant comparison method (Stern, 2008) was used to compare codes and themes, iteratively, to determine fit, explanatory power, comprehensiveness, and uniqueness.

4. Results and discussion

The data describe early career academics' affective experiences that are linked to the information behaviors in which they engaged, including feelings of stress, frustration, and stability and belonging. Fig. 1 depicts these findings, which are examined and developed throughout this section. Although each individual's information behavior and affective experiences differed – relating to their unique work contexts, previous experiences, and chosen responses, common themes emergent across the dataset – the results presented here include the most prominent emotions described, alongside the most commonly related information behavior experiences noted by participants.

4.1. Feelings of stress

Early career academics described feeling stressed (and, at times, overwhelmed) in striking ways. It was a feeling common amongst all study participants. Feelings of stress were linked to the information behaviors of prioritizing, nonuse, avoiding, and information seeking (see Fig. 1). While ECAs were accustomed to working hard during PhD study, many found that there was a heightened level of busyness when starting an academic position – in the amount of work, the number of tasks, the time allotted, and the pressure to succeed. As Nicole, a Canadian academic in the humanities academic, described it, “there's something about being an assistant professor that somehow is like a qualitative shift [from being a PhD student]. There's just something about labor that seems like it's on steroids.” As she tried to establish herself in her new job, she found the amount of work significantly

Table 1
Representative interview questions and check-in prompts.

Representative interview questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How did you find making the move from doctoral studies to faculty member? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Probe: Did you feel prepared for your position here? ○ Probe: What aspects of your position did you least expect? ● Thinking about your current position and a typical day, what kinds of information do you need to do your job? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Probe: How do you find information for the components of your job – teaching, research and service? ○ Probe: If you have questions about things, where do you go for help? ○ Probe: How do you feel about your information needs? Are they being met? ● Tell me about a time when information that you found useful for your job popped up without you looking for it. What information did you get? Where did you find it?
Representative check-in prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In what ways do you feel like you have a handle on the information you need to do your job? In what ways do you feel like you are still missing important information? ● In thinking about the research you've had a chance to do in the past month (if you've had a chance), have you noticed a change in the types of information you need or how you gather it (e.g. ethics, research plans, research grants, etc.)? Did you go to new or familiar sources? New or familiar, where did you learn about the sources?

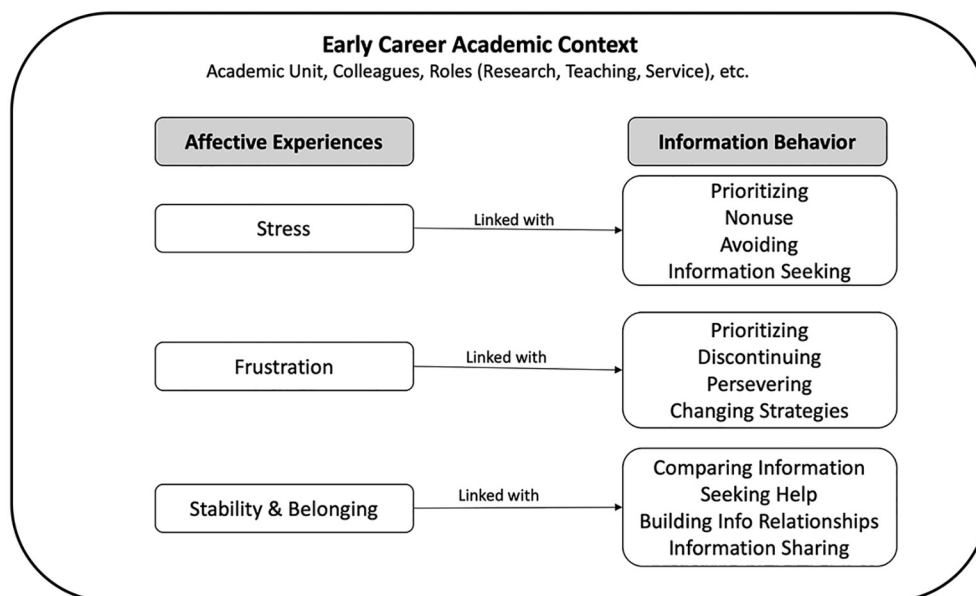


Fig. 1. The influence of affective experiences on information behavior.

stressful, even describing being “on the kitchen floor with a minor panic attack, at one point.” Experiencing significant stress was common to almost all participants. Evelyn, a Canadian academic in the social sciences, graphically discussed the pace of work:

So in these stages I feel like it's just like putting out fire after fire after fire. It's mere survival mode I'm in. I don't feel like I'm operating at the realm of capacity. I feel like I'm in sheer survival mode.

She went on to discuss the many tasks she is juggling and that some of them were “falling;” she did not feel that she was successful at keeping it all going. The feelings of being overwhelmed were significant, intense, and colored other experiences. Feeling overwhelmed is something many ECAs experience (Acker & Webber, 2017; Murray, 2008). Murray (2008) found that the enormous demands placed on ECAs can result in them being reactive to the demands of the jobs, unable to even attempt to manage what is required, and with “an almost hopeless sense of despair” (p. 119).

The feelings of stress and being overwhelmed – being in “survival mode” – led participants to change their information behavior. They needed to develop ways to manage the large amounts of information they received and that was needed for their job. For some, this resulted in strategic prioritization. Nathaniel, a Canadian academic in business, actively chose not to use information as a form of prioritization:

Some of the stuff [is so] complicated that I just ignore it... In orientation there was information overload. But in the whole first semester there was overload that I wasn't really caring about lots of stuff. I figured out what I needed. It was that bad. Still I haven't figured out how to send my printing in by using the system instead of walking down there. ... So stuff like this that [is] not easy to do, I'll just ignore them as long as they're not detrimental to my performance.

Nathaniel made judgements about what information could be ignored by prioritizing tasks that would help his performance compared to those tasks that would not. He engaged in “nonuse” of information, that is actively choosing not to use available information, due to information overload (Wilson, 1995, p. 46). Nathaniel implies that he may turn his attention to it, in the future, depending on the need to further priorities. Nathaniel used nonuse as a way to deal with information overload, using time to complete a task as a filter to determine what was needed (Case & Given, 2016).

Claire, an Australian academic in business, discussed the need to understand her annual progress review requirements, she contrasted two different ways she handles an information need. She stated,

When I feel strongly enough, I'll ask for help. I don't always do so and I waste some time doing internet searches or just ignoring it. So I think this annual progress review is a good example of just ignoring it. I think it's going to bite me in the bum sometime soon.

While Claire avoids information based on prioritization, she avoids seeking information about a topic, rather than avoiding information that has been provided to her. She is aware that she is ignoring potentially important information and it may have negative consequences. In this way, the stress she is feeling has motivated her to avoid information seeking; this reflects one of the ways emotions motivate information behavior (Savolainen, 2014). Her avoidance is also an example of blunting or engaging in distracting behavior to avoid information about a stressful event, as information will increase feelings of stress (Baker, 2005). As a way to deal with being stressed and overwhelmed, a number of participants reported avoiding seeking information that could be beneficial to them in other ways.

Stress also influenced how some participants engaged in information seeking activities. ECAs sought information from their colleagues, who were a main source of work-related information, and much preferred over university documents and websites. This was the case for Evelyn, who described her experience:

I often find [documents] very cumbersome and not user-friendly, and they actually end up eating a lot of your time. And because time is so critical, right? It's the commodity we're all seeking. We don't have enough time. And so [my colleagues], they could tell me in 5 minutes, what would take me at least an hour and a half to delve through the website to try to find.

Several participants contrasted looking for textual information with getting information from colleagues. Information sharing activities were frequently brief, allowing ECAs to get pertinent information at their point of need. Collegial information was often seen as saving time, being more convenient, and being more comprehensive (i.e., more complete and often more practical). That colleagues are frequently a main source of information at work is in line with other research (e.g., Cross & Sproull, 2004; Miller, 2015); however, other studies have not linked this activity to affect. Feeling stressed and overwhelmed meant

that ECAs' information behavior was designed to facilitate survival on the job. All but the most pressing information needs were ignored by the participants. Information seeking was done in ways that minimized effort and time, meaning that colleagues as sources of information gained importance. Not only did seeking information from colleagues save ECAs time and effort, but the information provided was also more comprehensive than what was available through textual sources. Additionally, colleagues were sources of help and support to stressed and overwhelmed ECAs, discussed in [Section 4.3](#).

4.2. Feelings of frustration

In addition to feeling stressed and overwhelmed, many participants expressed great frustration with aspects of their jobs. This was particularly true of bureaucratic and administrative matters. While every job has bureaucratic requirements, several participants described frustration at perplexing university processes and procedures that were opaque and difficult to navigate. Feelings of frustration were linked to the information behaviors of prioritizing, discontinuing, persevering, and changing strategies (see [Fig. 1](#)). Fredric, an Australian academic in business, discussed the challenge of dealing with the large number of university information systems. When asked how he was finding information about those systems and other practical information (e.g., whether he received an induction package), Fredric responded, "No, I didn't get any package. And it was a little bit of what you call the Darwinian model, so you come somewhere and then it's like, survive." Fredric's experience was like many ECAs when taking on a new position, coming with an incomplete understanding of the higher education landscape and their roles within the university. ECAs frequently know small pieces of information from which they try to create a more comprehensive representation of academia ([Bosetti et al., 2008](#)). Fredric's frustration with the complicated information environment is understandable, not only because he described a myriad of information systems that he had to learn, but also because there was little practical help provided to navigate that information environment. Using information is a way to make sense of a changing situation ([Yeoman, 2010](#)); yet, without adequate information, this task is much more difficult.

Participants' job frustrations often resulted from not having access to practical information or being unable to complete everyday information tasks. Seemingly insignificant tasks, such as submitting expense claims, became onerous. Madeline, a Canadian academic in the social sciences, described an encounter with a staff member in the finance office when her expense claim was rejected three times:

So she comes down to my office, ... builds the expense form on my computer. I watch her do it. It looks exactly like what I was doing, and then, so this was on a Friday, and on a Monday it bounced back to me, rejected by her, even though she had just built it on the Friday. ... I was like, 'aaahhhh! Oh my god.'

Madeline's frustration with bureaucracy was palpable. The frustration of academics making the transition to a job at "not being able to get answers to questions" or not having "access to knowledge" are also highlighted by [Bosetti et al. \(2008, p. 104\)](#). While a frustrating incident, Madeline identified the problem at the heart of this example. She identifies the time and mental energy taken up by what she termed "administrative bullshit" that stops her from doing the work that she ought to be doing – i.e., conducting research, teaching, and completing service commitments. While seemingly routine, administrative work can prevent academics from accomplishing the core work tasks on which their performance is judged. Administrative tasks like this were a constant source of frustration for all participants. [Bentley, Coates, Dobson, Goedegebuure, and Meek \(2012\)](#) found that time spent on non-academic work combined with a perceived lack of time to spend on research contributes to low levels of academic job satisfaction. This is exacerbated by the lack of institutional support.

When unable to locate needed information, participants had to make prioritization decisions – i.e., whether to put off information tasks or activities, to discontinue efforts to complete them, or to persevere to completion. Jesse, a Canadian academic in the social sciences, also ran into issues with the University's finance system. Having tried and failed to submit receipts, he decided to try to complete the task.

I guess it's a kind of silly thing, but I've been trying to file my expenses for my moving and the system here is just horrendous. And so I probably have tried 4 times. I finally got them in and they kept deleting my expense report and giving an error at the end. So, it's a little bit frustrating. I had to set aside almost an entire day just to try and get money back for things that I paid for. So that was a little bit frustrating but, particularly because there isn't really any instructions on how to do it and our support staff is not particularly helpful.

Jesse tried to accomplish this task without appropriate information or help. When asked how he figured out how to submit his expenses in the end, he said, "Trial and error. And I'm not 100% certain that I did it correctly. ... But I pressed submit, so, and it went." Trial and error was the way that Jesse persevered, changing strategies and keeping at the task until it was finished. This way of working takes time (he set aside almost an entire day) and mental energy. Jesse looked for instructions and help from support staff over the course of many months. Jesse made a judgement as to whether this information activity was worthwhile and chose to continue (given the financial costs he had already incurred) and he then spent time, energy, and attention to finally resolve it.

In addition to persevere with tasks, some participants decided that particular information tasks were not worth the time or effort. They simply gave up. Leanne, a Canadian academic in business, described receiving regular wrong-number calls because the university telephone directory was not updated. She said, "I've stopped caring now. I feel that I've paid my dues. I've flagged it a million times, so I'm done now." Frustrated with being constantly interrupted with wrong number calls and voicemail messages, Leanne contacted people about getting the telephone directory updated. However, after months of inaction, she decided to give up trying to find the right person to contact and "stopped caring." While still frustrated with receiving calls, her level of frustration led her to discontinue when she saw few options and more work to resolve the issue. Interestingly, Leanne made the opposite decision about her faculty profile on the university website. With the website, she persevered, continuing to seek information and repeatedly raising the issue with staff until it was corrected. This may demonstrate further prioritization, working to ensure correct contact information – and representation – online.

As a new academic, having to work hard to figure out how to use university systems or to accomplish simple tasks, participants reported being frustrated, exasperated, and having increased information needs. Frustrating experiences, when goals are thwarted, are salient ([Mentis, 2007](#)). Added to this, information seeking becomes more challenging when experiencing negative emotions ([Heinström, 2005](#)). What is striking about participants' experiences of frustration is the prominence of this feeling, with frustration frequently palpable during the interviews. ECAs spent significant time discussing frustrations, indicating their importance to their experience, as well as motivators for their actions.

4.3. Feelings of stability and belonging

Transitions are unsettling times, when changes mean that individuals experience instability and often not knowing where they belong. This is a part of the transitional process in which individuals must "redefine their sense of self and redevelop self-agency in response to disruptive life events" ([Kralik, Visentin, & van Loon, 2006, p. 321](#)). Feelings of stability and belonging were linked to the information behaviors of comparing information, seeking help, building information

relationships, and information sharing (see Fig. 1). When ECAs experienced instability and not belonging, they had to actively negotiate between their previous experience and their current circumstances. Interestingly, oppositional feelings were experienced simultaneously. The participants had more secure employment than they did as doctoral students or immediately following graduation. However, they were both in the new job and not yet tenured, meaning their positions remained tenuous. The transitional period between finishing the doctorate and finding a job was identified by many participants in highly emotional terms. Jason, an Australian academic in the social sciences, discussed his experience after finishing his PhD:

I'd seen people who were very capable and very intelligent, and who didn't make it, basically. It was a real fear for me. There was a lot of sleepless nights. And...I'd also realized how much I liked it and I didn't really want to do anything else, you know? And so it was a pretty scary sort of 18 months or so between submitting my PhD and getting the job.

Jason's experience highlights not only the uncertainty ECAs experience, but also that this feeling can continue over an extended period of time. Few academics receive permanent jobs immediately after finishing their degrees. Many spend time working on short-term, precarious contracts, meaning their lives are "marked by stress, anxiety and the inability to make plans – either personal or occupational – for the future" (Gill, 2014, p. 19).

Circumstances change once academics move into full-time, continuing positions; there is greater security. However, although "[t]here is no longer anxiety about finding a job; it has now become anxiety about surviving in the job" (Menges, 1996, p. 170). While there is an increase in stability and a decrease in some negative feelings (such as uncertainty and fear) about getting a job, ECAs next have concerns about their job performance. Being new in a position and pre-tenure, many participants were very aware of the insecurity of their positions. Jesse expressed concerns about the lack of clear criteria for achieving tenure, which resulted in comparing his work to that of his colleagues. He described his feeling in this way:

I think almost the ambiguity; I feel it's just if I could actually tell myself or someone told me [what I need to do to succeed] ... I'd feel a lot more comfortable... Whereas because my only real referent is these other people who are running a ridiculous amount of studies and doing a ridiculous amount of stuff. ... And so I need to do at least as much as this person. And that's not great because that's a moving target.

Using his colleagues as a marker was problematic, adding to Jesse's stress, as he felt he would never know what would be enough to succeed. Feeling insecure about tenure/probation is not an uncommon situation, as ECAs are frequently unsure about the specific requirements of their job (Greene et al., 2008; Murray, 2008). This makes tenure an "ambiguous, uncertain, and stressful" process (Mullen & Forbes, 2000, p. 34).

Comparison was also an important strategy used by ECAs to negotiate their transition and regain stability. ECAs used information from their experiences as doctoral students or working on short-term contracts to compare with their current position and situate themselves and their work. Adam, an Australian academic in the humanities, compared his experience as a PhD and a casual academic to his current position, all of which were at the same institution:

I felt the, it seemed to me that starting as a staff member compared to being a PhD student or being... a casual academic involved like an important sort of recognition of your abilities. So for me, yeah, there was an increased amount of trust in terms of your capacity to do a job, which was reflected in kind of now you have to do a lot more of the internal processes at the department.

While working at the same university, changing roles meant that

Adam felt he had gained recognition and credibility. Belonging not only had to do with how others viewed or treated the participants, but also with one's own sense of belonging and professional identity. Adam reflected on his roles as PhD student and casual academic, comparing these to his current academic position, and noting the differences in his situation. By recognizing what is similar and what is different, comparison allows individuals undergoing a transition to make sense of their experience. There is an emerging body of literature in this area that illuminates the importance of comparison in various transitional contexts that can guide our understanding of ECAs' experiences. In examining women's immigration experiences, for example, Messias (2002) discusses the constant comparison of "before" and "after" as a way to connect and move between those two worlds, using comparison as "a way of situating themselves and making sense" (p. 197). Examining the experience of newly diagnosed cancer patients, McCaughan and McKenna (2007) found that comparing their own experiences to those of other patients was used as a common strategy to gather information and better understand their disease. Comparison is part of the process of being situated in new circumstances, creating meaning, understandings, and perceptions (Meleis et al., 2000). The process of comparing helps to decrease feelings of instability and increase feelings of belonging in a new situation. In this way, ECAs' affective experiences become sources of information in the process (Dervin & Reinhard, 2007; Godbold, 2013; Julien et al., 2005); feelings of stability and belonging inform individuals of how successfully they have used information to understand and settle into their new situation.

Another way that participants increased their feelings of stability and sense of belonging was to seek information – as well as support – from their colleagues. Professional relationships with colleagues were important, as these relationships were common ways the ECAs gained crucial information, help, mentorship, and support that would be challenging to gain in other ways. Claire gained mentorship from a formal program set up in her university,

I did happen to come across information about a mentoring program for early career researchers, and so I opted into that ... We met up probably once a month, sometimes a bit less frequently, but she pointed me to things. ... She also showed me some other bits and pieces and helped me strategize about how to remarket myself from a PhD student to an academic, ... So the mentoring was probably the most critical thing last year.

For Claire, she received crucial information and advice from her senior colleague about transitioning from doctoral student to academic, further developing her professional identity. She noted that this information was "critical" for her development. Colleagues were not just sources of information but sources of help and support. However, support was not always available nor was mentorship always effectual, particularly when mentorship was assigned, as was the case for some ECAs. Meaningful information exchanges came as a result of building professional relationships or "information relationships" (Cross & Sproull, 2004), which facilitate information sharing and contribute to actionable knowledge. Effective information relationships also have a personal element that creates a feeling of safety to be able to "ask dumb questions" and learn about unfamiliar topics (Cross & Sproull, 2004, p. 449). In these ways, colleagues played an important support and informational role to ECAs.

4.4. The influence of affect on information behavior

The transitions early career academics experience in their first permanent jobs are accompanied by a strong affective dimension, including feelings of stress, frustration, and stability and belonging. In addressing the research question (How do the affective experiences of early career academics influence the information they need and how they find, share, and use information in their academic work?), this research contributes in significant ways to understanding ECAs'

experiences and information behaviors as they settle into their new positions. The findings related to key affective responses are as follows:

1. **Stress:** Feelings of stress were connected with ECAs' decisions to prioritize the information with which they dealt. ECAs engaged in information "nonuse" (i.e. actively choosing not to use available information) when too much information was provided and information avoidance (i.e. active choosing not to seek information) when required information was not provided, as ways to cope with stress. Stress also prompted information seeking from colleagues.
2. **Frustration:** Feelings of frustration, particularly related to administrative tasks, also led to prioritization and making the decision to discontinue or persevere (i.e., choosing to actively engage in continued efforts, such as trial and error), or changing strategies and accomplishing the task by whatever means are available.
3. **Stability and belonging:** Transitions are connected to feelings of stability and instability, belonging and not belonging. To deal with this, ECAs frequently compared information – typically their experiences before and after the transition – to situate themselves and their place in a new context. Beyond seeking information from colleagues, ECAs sought help and support, building and maintaining information relationships that facilitated sharing information.

The contribution of this research to the field of information behavior is that it makes links between affective experiences and specific information behaviors. As Fig. 1 denotes, affective experiences influence the ways ECAs act, respond, and adapt to information in their new contexts, including working in a new academic unit, meeting new colleagues, and engaging in new professional roles. Across all of the new experiences encountered by ECAs, affect played a key role in shaping the interactions between context, information, and the resulting information behaviors.

5. Conclusion

Academia is a high-pressured field, frequently associated with stress and burnout. In addition, transitions are times of upheaval and frequently associated with strong emotions. Through its examination of academic transitions, the findings of this study have important implications for ECAs and those working with them. It is important that there are discussions with doctoral students and ECAs about the challenges of academic life, including the feelings of stress, frustration, and instability that frequently accompany the transition to permanent academic positions. While transitions are typically challenging, those working in universities can help make the transition smoother by ensuring that ECAs are not overwhelmed with information during induction but are provided with the necessary – and practical – information required to carry out academic roles.

The findings of this research demonstrate the importance of studying the role of affect in information behavior, which remains an understudied yet vital aspect of individuals' experiences. Through in-depth, qualitative research, this study was able to link specific affective experiences of early career academics with resulting information behavior. Negative emotions influence how early career academics seek information or not, how they use information or not, and the strategies with which they engage to accomplish their goals. More positive emotions influence how ECAs seek and share information, as well as how they use information to make sense of their situation. This study also demonstrates the need for continued research into the affective dimension of information behavior to better understand how affect influences what information individuals need, and how they find, share, and use that information. Affect is frequently mentioned as important to information behavior; however, it is rarely the focus of information behavior research nor clearly linked to specific information activities. This lack of attention makes it difficult to determine the role of affect in complex information activities and prevents us from fully

understanding individuals' holistic experiences of their work and personal contexts.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Willson would like to acknowledge the financial support received for this research, including a Doctoral Fellowship, Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada (Award #752-2014-0499), and an Australian Postgraduate Award International Postgraduate Research Scholarship (Charles Sturt University).

References

- Acker, S., & Webber, M. (2017). Made to measure: Early career academics in the Canadian university workplace. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36, 541–554. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1288704>.
- Albright, K. (2010). Multidisciplinarity in information behavior: Expanding boundaries or fragmentation of the field? *Libri*, 60, 98–106. <https://doi.org/10.1515/libr.2010.009>.
- Al-Muomen, N., Morris, A., & Maynard, S. (2012). Modelling information-seeking behavior of graduate students at Kuwait University. *Journal of Documentation*, 68, 430–459. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220411211239057>.
- Arapakis, I., Lalmas, M., Cambazoglu, B. B., Marcos, M.-C., & Jose, J. M. (2014). User engagement in online news: Under the scope of sentiment, interest, affect, and gaze. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 65, 1988–2005.
- Austin, A. E., & McDaniels, M. (2006). Preparing the professoriate of the future: Graduate student socialization for faculty roles. In J. C. Smart (Vol. Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research*. Vol. 21. *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 397–465). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Baker, L. M. (2005). Monitoring and blunting. In K. E. Fisher, S. Erdelez, & L. McKechnie (Eds.), *Theories of information behavior* (pp. 239–241). Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc.
- Baker, V. L., & Pifer, M. J. (2011). The role of relationships in the transition from doctoral student to independent scholar. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33(1), 5–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2010.515569>.
- Barry, K. M., Woods, M., Warnecke, E., Stirling, C., & Martin, A. (2018). Psychological health of doctoral candidates, study-related challenges and perceived performance. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37, 468–483. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1425979>.
- Baruchson-Arbib, S., & Bronstein, J. (2007). Humanists as information users in the digital age: The case of Jewish studies scholars in Israel. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 58, 2269–2279. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.20699>.
- Bentley, P. J., Coates, H., Dobson, I. R., Goedegebuure, L., & Meek, V. L. (2012). Factors associated with job satisfaction amongst Australian university academics and future workforce implications. In P. J. Bentley, H. Coates, I. R. Dobson, L. Goedegebuure, & V. L. Meek (Eds.), *Job satisfaction around the academic world* (pp. 29–53). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Bosanquet, A., Mailey, A., Matthews, K. E., & Lodge, J. M. (2017). Redefining "early career" in academia: A collective narrative approach. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36, 890–902. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1263934>.
- Bosetti, L., Kawalik, C., & Patterson, P. (2008). Betwixt and between: Academic women in transition. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 38, 95–115.
- Bronstein, J. (2007). The role of the research phase in information seeking behaviour of Jewish studies scholars: A modification of Ellis's behavioural characteristics. *Information Research*, 12(3), Retrieved December 8, 2015 from <http://informationr.net/ir/12-3/paper318.html>.
- Case, D. O., & Given, L. M. (2016). *Looking for information: A survey of research on information seeking, needs, and behavior* (4th ed.). Bingley, England: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Catalano, A. J. (2013). Patterns of graduate students' information seeking behavior: A meta-synthesis of the literature. *Journal of Documentation*, 29, 243–274. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220411311300066>.
- Charmaz, K. (2008). Grounded theory as an emergent method. In S. N. Hesse-Biber, & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Handbook of emergent methods* (pp. 155–170). New York: Guilford Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Charmaz, K., & Bryant, A. (2008). Grounded theory. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 375–378). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Chu, C. M. (1999). Literary critics at work and their information needs: A research-phases model. *Library & Information Science Research*, 21, 247–273.
- Cross, R., & Sproull, L. (2004). More than an answer: Information relationships for actionable knowledge. *Organization Science*, 15, 446–462. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1040.0075>.
- Davidson, R. J., Scherer, K. R., & Goldsmith, H. H. (2003). Introduction. In R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, & H. H. Goldsmith (Eds.), *Handbook of affective sciences* (pp. xiii–xvii). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dervin, B. (1983). An overview of sense-making research: Concepts, methods, and results to date. Presented at the international communication association annual meeting, Dallas, TX Retrieved February 16, 2016 from <http://communication.sbs.ohio-state.edu/sense-making/art/dervin83.html>.
- Dervin, B. (1999). On studying information seeking methodologically: The implications of

- connecting metatheory to method. *Information Processing & Management*, 35, 727–750. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0306-4573\(99\)00023-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0306-4573(99)00023-0).
- Dervin, B., & Reinhard, C. D. (2007). How emotional dimensions of situated information seeking relate to user evaluations of help from sources: An exemplar study informed by sense-making methodology. In D. Nahl, & D. Bilal (Eds.). *Information and emotion: The emergent affective paradigm in information behavior research and theory* (pp. 51–84). Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc.
- Eddy, P. L., & Gaston-Gayles, J. L. (2008). New faculty on the block: Issues of stress and support. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 17(1–2), 89–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911350802168878>.
- Fisher, K. E., & Landry, C. F. (2007). Understanding the information behavior of stay-at-home mothers through affect. In D. Nahl, & D. Bilal (Eds.). *Information and emotion: The emergent affective paradigm in information behavior research and theory* (pp. 211–234). Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc.
- Fleming-May, R., & Yuro, L. (2009). From student to scholar: Social sciences PhD students' transformation. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 9, 199–221.
- Ford, N., Miller, D., & Moss, N. (2001). The role of individual differences in internet searching: An empirical study. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 52, 1049–1066. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.1165>.
- Ge, X. (2010). Information-seeking behavior in the digital age: A multidisciplinary study of academic researchers. *College & Research Libraries*, 71, 435–455.
- George, C., Bright, A., Hurlbert, T., Linke, E. C., St. Clair, G., & Stein, J. (2006). Scholarly use of information: Graduate students' information seeking behaviour. *Information Research*, 11(4), Retrieved December 8, 2015 from <http://informationr.net/ir/11-4/paper272.html>.
- Gill, R. (2014). Academics, cultural workers and critical labor studies. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 7, 12–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2013.861763>.
- Given, L. M. (2007). Emotional entanglements on the university campus: The role of affect in undergraduates' information behaviors. In D. Nahl, & D. Bilal (Eds.). *Information and emotion: The emergent affective paradigm in information behavior research and theory* (pp. 161–176). Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc.
- Godbold, N. (2013). An information need for emotional cues: Unpacking the role of emotions in sense making. *Information Research*, 18(1), Retrieved August 3, 2015 from <http://informationr.net/ir/18-1/paper561.html>.
- Green, R., & Macauley, P. (2007). Doctoral students' engagement with information: An American-Australian perspective. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 7, 317–332. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2007.0031>.
- Greene, H. C., O'Connor, K., Good, A., Ledford, C., Peel, B., & Zhang, G. (2008). Building a support system toward tenure: Challenges and needs of tenure-track faculty in colleges of education. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 16, 429–447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611260802433791>.
- Heinström, J. (2005). Fast surfing, broad scanning and deep diving: The influence of personality and study approach on students' information-seeking behavior. *Journal of Documentation*, 61, 228–247. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220410510585205>.
- Hemmings, B. (2012). Sources of research confidence for early career academics: A qualitative study. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31, 171–184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.559198>.
- Julien, H., & Fourie, I. (2015). Reflections of affect in studies of information behavior in HIV/AIDS contexts: An exploratory quantitative content analysis. *Library & Information Science Research*, 37, 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2014.09.001>.
- Julien, H., McKechnie, L. E. F., & Hart, S. (2005). Affective issues in library and information science systems work: A content analysis. *Library & Information Science Research*, 27, 453–466. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2005.08.004>.
- Kinman, G. (2016). Effort–reward imbalance and overcommitment in UK academics: Implications for mental health, satisfaction and retention. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 38, 504–518. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2016.1181884>.
- Kralik, D., Visentin, K., & van Loon, A. (2006). Transition: A literature review. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 55, 320–329. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2006.03899.x>.
- Kuhlthau, C. C. (1991). Inside the search process: Information seeking from the user's perspective. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 42, 361–371.
- Laudel, G., & Gläser, J. (2008). From apprentice to colleague: The metamorphosis of early career researchers. *Higher Education*, 55, 387–406. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-007-9063-7>.
- Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., & Gisle, L. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*, 46, 868–879. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.02.008>.
- Lopatovska, I. (2014). Toward a model of emotions and mood in the online information search process. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 65, 1775–1793. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.23078>.
- McCaughan, E., & McKenna, H. (2007). Never-ending making sense: Towards a substantive theory of the information-seeking behaviour of newly diagnosed cancer patients. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 16, 2096–2104. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2702.2006.01817.x>.
- McKenzie, P. J. (2001). *Negotiating authoritative knowledge: Information practices across a life transition*. London, Ontario: University of Western Ontario.
- Meho, L. I., & Tibbo, H. R. (2003). Modeling the information-seeking behavior of social scientists: Ellis's study revisited. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 54, 570–587.
- Meleis, A. I., Sawyer, L. M., Im, E.-O., Messias, Hilfinger, & Schumacher, K. (2000). Experiencing transitions: An emerging middle-range theory. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 23, 12–28.
- Menges, R. J. (1996). Experiences of newly hired faculty. *To improve the academy*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press. Retrieved September 29, 2015 from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad/360/>.
- Mentis, H. M. (2007). Memory of frustrating experiences. In D. Nahl, & D. Bilal (Eds.). *Information and emotion: The emergent affective paradigm in information behavior research and theory* (pp. 197–210). Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc.
- Messias, D. K. H. (2002). Transnational health resources, practices, and perspectives: Brazilian immigrant women's narratives. *Journal of Immigrant Health*, 4, 183–200.
- Miller, F. Q. (2015). Experiencing information use for early career academics' learning: A knowledge ecosystem model. *Journal of Documentation*, 71, 1228–1249. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-04-2014-0058>.
- Mullen, C. A., & Forbes, S. A. (2000). Untenured faculty: Issues of transition, adjustment and mentorship. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 8, 31–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713685508>.
- Mulligan, K., & Scherer, K. R. (2012). Toward a working definition of emotion. *Emotion Review*, 4, 345–357.
- Murray, J. P. (2008). New faculty members' perceptions of the academic work life. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 17, 107–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911350802168886>.
- Nahl, D., & Bilal, D. (Eds.). (2007). *Information and emotion: The emergent affective paradigm in information behavior research and theory*. Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc.
- Pettigrew, K. (2000). Lay information provision in community settings: How community health nurses disseminate human services information to the elderly. *The Library Quarterly*, 70, 47–85.
- Ponjuan, L., Conley, V. M., & Trower, C. (2011). Career stage differences in pre-tenure track faculty perceptions of professional and personal relationships with colleagues. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 82, 319–346. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2011.0015>.
- Rupp-Serrano, K., & Robbins, S. (2013). Information-seeking habits of education faculty. *College & Research Libraries*, 74, 131–142.
- Sadler, E., & Given, L. M. (2007). Affordance theory: A framework for graduate students' information behavior. *Journal of Documentation*, 63, 115–141. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220410710723911>.
- Savolainen, R. (2014). Emotions as motivators for information seeking: A conceptual analysis. *Library and Information Science Research*, 36, 59–65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2013.10.004>.
- Shin, J. C., & Jung, J. (2014). Academics job satisfaction and job stress across countries in the changing academic environments. *Higher Education*, 67, 603–620. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9668-y>.
- Stern, P. N. (2008). Constant comparison. In L. M. Given (Ed.). *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 115–116). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. Retrieved from.
- Sutherland, K. A. (2015). Constructions of success in academia: An early career perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(4), 743–759. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1072150>.
- Vezzosi, M. (2009). Doctoral students' information behaviour: An exploratory study at the University of Parma (Italy). *New Library World*, 110, 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03074800910928595>.
- Westbrook, L. (2003). Information needs and experiences of scholars in women's studies: Problems and solutions. *College & Research Libraries*, 64, 192–209.
- Wilson, T. D. (1981). On user studies and information needs. *Journal of Documentation*, 37, 3–15.
- Wilson, P. (1995). Unused relevant information in research and development. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 46, 45–51. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1097-4571\(199501\)46:1<45::AID-ASIS>3.0.CO;2-X](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-4571(199501)46:1<45::AID-ASIS>3.0.CO;2-X).
- Yeoman, A. (2010). Applying McKenzie's model of information practices in everyday life information seeking in the context of the menopause transition. *Information Research*, 15(4) <http://informationr.net/ir/15-4/paper444.html>.