Beyond Everyday Life: Information Seeking Behavior in Deeply Meaningful and Profoundly Personal Contexts

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ABSTRACT
Information seeking behavior research is traditionally partitioned into two realms of life experiences: 1) work or job related; 2) everyday life information seeking (Savolainen, 2010). These two spheres encompass a significant share if not majority of life’s time and effort at the universal level. This paper examines information seeking behavior within two specific contexts far outside the realm of everyday life. Characterized as deeply meaningful and intensely personal with life-long impacts, these contexts may not easily fit within existing information seeking behavior framework. We use examples from lived experiences in two deeply meaningful contexts to explore the scope of everyday life information seeking (ELIS), through women who relinquished a child for adoption and from sperm donor offspring who have tried to uncover the identity of their donor. Situations like these have profound impact on the focal person; perceived information needs and search strategies directly affect processes of decision making, coping, and understanding of one’s self. Continuing the shift toward a more person centric approach, we suggest information seeking behavior within some contexts should be explored as a third facet of life experience: the deeply meaningful and profoundly personal.

Keywords
Human information behavior, everyday life information seeking, personal crisis, adoption, birthmothers, decision making, sperm donor offspring.

INTRODUCTION
Research in the area of human information behavior has been fruitful in the past few decades, moving beyond a resource-focused to a person-centric perspective. Numerous descriptive models characterize complex relationships among a person’s perceived information need, cultural and situational contexts, information resources, systems and intermediaries. Theories of information behavior often address cognitive influences such as problem-solving, mental models, and affect heuristics. Situated under the umbrella concept of information behavior is the more historical notion of information seeking behavior defined as “the purposive seeking for information as a consequence of a need to satisfy some goal” (Wilson, 2000, p. 49). Information seeking behavior research is traditionally partitioned into two realms of life experiences: 1) work or job related; 2) everyday life information seeking (Savolainen, 2010). These two spheres encompass a significant share if not majority of life’s time and effort at the universal level. The work described here examines information seeking behavior within two specific contexts far outside the realm of everyday life. Characterized as deeply meaningful and intensely personal with life-long impacts, these contexts may not easily fit within existing information seeking behavior framework. We use examples from lived experiences in two deeply meaningful contexts to explore the scope of everyday life information seeking (ELIS), through women who relinquished a child for adoption and from sperm donor offspring who have tried to uncover the identity of their donor. Situations like these have profound impact on the focal person; perceived information needs and search strategies directly affect processes of decision making, coping, and understanding of one’s self. Continuing the shift toward a more person centric approach, we suggest information seeking behavior within some contexts should be explored as a third facet of life experience: the deeply meaningful and profoundly personal.

OVERARCHING RESEARCH QUESTIONS
These parallel studies are guided by two specific research questions designed to explore the boundaries of ELIS in terms of context and situational influence:

• What are the characteristics of these deeply meaningful and profoundly personal situations that make it challenging to place within existing ELIS frameworks?
LITERATURE REVIEW

Everyday Life Information Seeking
The concept of everyday life information seeking (ELIS) is widely used in constructing research frameworks of information behavior. As Savolainen (2010) explains, “The key word is everyday life, which refers to a set of attributes characterizing relatively stable and recurrent qualities of both work and free time activities. The most central attributes of everyday life are familiar, ordinary, and routine” (Savolainen, 2004, p 1). Within the sphere of ELIS several influential models of information behavior exist including Dervin’s sense-making approach (1992), Bates’ berrypicking (1989), Chatman’s small world concept (2000), Piroli and Card’s information foraging (1999), Williamson’s ecological model (1998), Wilson’s problem solving model (1999) and Fisher, Durrance and Hinton’s (2004) information grounds. But what happens when we step outside the realm of the everyday? Consider a personal crisis such as divorce, home foreclosure or unplanned pregnancy. Consider situations of intense personal meaning such as identity and genetic heritage with lifetime implications. Do existing models of ELIS effectively address information behavior within the context of the deeply meaningful, the unfamiliar, the extraordinary and the profoundly personal?

Information Seeking Behavior of Birthmothers
Adoption is the “permanent legal transfer of full parental rights from one parent or set of parents to another parent or set of parents” (Henry and Pollack, 2009, p.1). Closed adoption is the legacy form of adoption in the U.S. No identifying information or very little non-identifying information is provided to birthparent, adoptive parent and adoptee. Open adoption arrangements vary a great deal; birthparent involvement ranges from occasional contact and photo exchange to regular engagement as the child grows (Pavao, 2007). A full and complete picture of adoption in the U.S. is challenging to draw for two primary reasons. First, sources of national data are neither centralized nor continuous (Biafora and Esposito, 2007). Individual states in the U.S. have laws regulating various aspects of adoption including reporting, access to records, and revocation rights. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates 125,000 adoptions occur each year, 46% private/independent adoptions, 39% public adoptions, and 15% international adoptions (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). A second obstacle in generating an accurate portrait is a legacy of social stigma and secrecy surrounding adoption.

Generations of secrecy have prevented us from knowing just how widespread [adoption] has become. The subject has been considered off-limits for so long, both by individuals and by society as a whole ... that determining how many triad members there are – or have been – would require sorting through the individual finalization records of every courthouse in every city and town in every state (Pertman, 2000, pp. 8-9).

Research in the area of adoption characteristically revolves around the “triad” which describes the three human elements of the relation: the biological or birth parents, the adoptee, and the adoptive parent(s). The literature of psychology, sociology, social work, and law provide extensive exploration into the experience of adoptees and the adoptee-adoptive parent relationship. But the research focusing on birthparents is limited in quantity and scope (Freundlich, 2007; Zamosny, O’Brien, Baden, & Wiley, 2003). Studies typically examine demographic and socioeconomic variables, teenage pregnancy, grief counseling, reunion, and the open-closed adoption continuum. The existing studies, however, do not address the specific information seeking process of these birthmothers or how they identify, evaluate and use information in their decision process.

At both the macro and micro level, a crisis is some juncture or moment in which a decisive change, for better or worse, is imminent. Slaikeu (1990) describes a crisis as “a temporary state of upset and disorganization, characterized chiefly by an individual’s inability to cope with a particular situation using customary methods of problem solving” (p. 15). Stone (1993) describes the situational crisis as a stressful real-life event that erupts unexpectedly, such as divorce, diagnosis, or job promotion. An unplanned pregnancy may fall easily into the category of personal situational crisis.

Decision making and information behavior are intricately connected in theory and practice. Both involve cognitive processes, engage evaluation measures and are subject to heuristics and potential bias such as information avoidance and selective exposure (Case, Andrews, Johnson, & Allard, 2005; Miles, Voorwinden, Chapman, & Wardle, 2008) and monitoring and blunting (Baker & Pettigrew, 1999). In decision theory the ability to consider and evaluate alternative possibilities is a fundamental component in Barron’s (2008) active open-minded thinking which may fend off irrational behavior. Relying on heuristics and prior beliefs is not sufficient and may lead to biased and erroneous decisions (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). The concept of information itself is not always congruent between behavioral decision theory and information behavior. Whereas the latter typically involves external sources such as other people, media, written communication and statistics, it is possible within decision theory to rely exclusively on internalized feelings and beliefs. This research focuses on real-life decision making requiring some amount of external information seeking and use. The nature of child relinquishment necessitates some action on the part of the birthmother including interaction with an adoption agency or intermediary, transfer of legal parental rights, and ultimately a decision that she will need to cope with for the rest of her life.

• How do these contexts influence the search behaviors?
Information Seeking Behavior of Sperm Donor Offspring

Artificial insemination is defined as ‘the introduction of semen into the vagina or cervix by artificial means’ (Jensen, 1982). The use of donor sperm grew popular in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1940s, as a solution to married couples seeking a solution to male infertility (Lorbach, 2003). In the early days of sperm donor insemination, women were provided little information about the sperm donor that would eventually help them conceive children. Seventy years later, sperm donation and the insemination of donor sperm has become a profitable segment of the infertility industry. Single women, married women and women in same sex relationships are regularly provided non-identifying information about the sperm donor including age, race, religion, eye color, hair color and education (Mahlstedt, LaBounty & Kennedy, 2009). Some women are even provided the choice of giving their child the opportunity to learn the identity of their donor once they reach the age of 18. However, the sperm donor industry is largely unregulated in the United States, which results in inconsistent practices concerning information release (Freeman, Jadva, Kramer & Golombok 2009).

While the practice of donor anonymity in the United States has been slow to change, Austria, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the Australian states of Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales have banned donor anonymity and have developed donor registries with which donor offspring can consult to discover the identity of their donor upon turning 18 years old (Blyth & Frith, 2009). While many of the individuals conceived via donor offspring that are born today have access to some information about their donor, decades of individuals conceived via donor insemination or donor offspring, have little to no information about their donors and in turn, half of their genetic identity. As a result, many donor offspring begin a search for information about their donor.

Many donor offspring feel compelled to search for information about their donor, but lack support in the process. Turner and Coyle (2000) interviewed 16 donor conceived individuals and found that participants reported feeling a loss if identity when they were told of the true nature of their conception. All of the participants interviewed had conducted searches for information about their donors. Participants also desired support from friends and family in their search for information and recognition from others that their search was important (Turner & Coyle 2000). Turner and Coyle (2000) found that many donor offspring experienced genetic bewilderment, or problems with identity development linked to the lack of knowledge about one’s origins.

Of the 85 donor conceived respondents that replied to Mahlstedt et al.’s (2009) questionnaire about the experiences of sperm donor offspring and their attitudes toward sperm donation, 87% of respondents wanted to know more information about their donor and/or half siblings and 80% had searched for information. According to Mahlstedt et al. (2009), most donor offspring did not learn of the true nature of the means of their conception until age 18. Once this was discovered, respondents reported feeling emotional and psychological stress and feeling a loss of identity once having discovered the secret. Further, donor offspring are frustrated that they are not allowed access to information about their donor and half of their identity

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METHODS

Information Seeking Behavior of Birthmothers

This exploratory study into the information seeking behavior of women considering placing a child for adoption draws from the experience, expertise and insight of birthmothers themselves and professionally trained adoption specialists to provide concrete accounts of behavior within the context of real-life personal crisis.

Grounded in the overarching research questions of the two parallel studies, we tailor the research questions of the first study to the specific context of child relinquishment to adoption.

• What are the information needs and search pathways of women considering placing a child (born or unborn) for adoption?
How do stress, emotion, secrecy, and shame surrounding the decision process affect a woman’s information seeking behavior?

Participants
Five birthmothers responded to recruitment emails and participated in a private, face-to-face interview. Non-identifying demographic data are described in Table 1. Five adoption professionals responded to recruitment letters and participated in a private, face-to-face interview. Non-identifying demographic data are described in Table 1. In light of the very personal and emotional nature of an adoption decision, recruitment material clearly defined the scope of the inquiry as being fully outside any moral, ethical or religious discussion.

Procedures
Semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes were conducted with adoption professionals who have provided counseling and support for birthmothers during their decision process. The researcher recruited participants through social service agencies and community counseling services. Questions were designed to obtain data characterizing first-hand experiences with birthmothers concerning 1) support processes and interactions, 2) expressed emotions and stress levels, and 3) observations about information seeking behavior throughout the decision making process. Birthmothers were recruited via mass email announcement through a large public university, listserv postings to online birthmother support groups, and through a local chapter of the American Adoption Congress. Semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes were conducted with women who relinquished a child for adoption at some point in the past. Questions were designed to obtain data characterizing their own experiences surrounding information seeking behavior, reflections and coping strategies during the emotional decision process to place a child for adoption. Each interview was conducted in a location selected by the participant for convenience and comfort. No incentive was offered for participation. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, participants were assigned a pseudonym and field notes were written by the researcher during and following each interview.

Information Seeking Behavior of Sperm Donor Offspring
An exploratory search was conducted in order to explore the search experiences of sperm donor offspring searching for information about their donors. The initial research questions were:

• How do sperm donor offspring search for information about their donors and their genetic origins?
• What commonalities and differences exist between the characteristics of donor offspring searches for information about their donors and their genetic origins?

Participants
Interview subjects were recruited from an announcement sent to the People Conceived via Artificial Insemination (PCVAI) electronic mailing list and an announcement forwarded by the director of a non-profit organization specializing in infertility and donor conception. Potential subjects were required to be 18 years of age and have engaged in some form of search related to their nature of being conceived via sperm donor insemination. Due to the varying degrees of laws and practices regarding information release to donor offspring worldwide, it was necessary to limit the participant pool to individuals conceived in the United States and currently living in the United States so as to provide an equal frame of reference.

Procedures
Interview questions were designed to gain information about the details of learning they were donor offspring, the process of searching for information and emotional responses to searching for information. Hour-long, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted from July 2009-October 2009. As an incentive, participants were offered a $10 amazon.com gift card for their participation. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Categories for analysis were developed from the interview guide; additional codes emerged from the interviews. Data from this study is also reported in Cushing (2010), which includes an in-depth reporting of the search experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthmother Participants (n=5)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age at interview</td>
<td>Early 30’s – 60 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at child relinquishment</td>
<td>17-30 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relinquished* child now</td>
<td>12-40 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic location at time of relinquishment</td>
<td>4 different U.S. states</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Reunion status with child | No = 2  
Yes = 3*  
*One birthmother participant successfully revoked adoption |
| Type of adoption | Closed = 3  
Open = 2 |
| Adoption Professionals Participants (n=5) |  |
| Time working in adoption | 10-31 years |
| Experience providing support to girls/women considering child relinquishment | 10 – over 100 birthmothers |
| Profession | 4 Licensed Clinical Social Workers  
1 Licensed Counselor |

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information.
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Information Seeking Behavior of Birthmothers
Responses from birthmothers reflecting upon their experiences surrounding perceived information needs, desires, gathering strategies and sources utilized varied greatly ranging from almost passive receiver to aggressive and persistent seeker.

Unfamiliar Territory
Although adoption as a concept was familiar to all of the birthmothers, the actual process was completely unknown and unfamiliar. The situation required an intimidating foray into new and uncertain sources for information and/or an almost complete reliance on others to investigate the particulars and often make decisions.

Margaret, Birthmother: I never considered suicide or anything like that, it was just call daddy and what are we gonna do about this [pregnancy]. So he came and he had talked to his doctor friend and his doctor friend had given him some advice and where I was going to school at that time they had what they called home for unwed mothers. So basically he and the doctor made arrangements so that when I would have been ordinarily going back to school, instead both my mother and my father took me back as if I was going to school because it was all very hush hush, I mean nobody knew. No one was to know. So daddy did everything.

Lillian, Birthmother: I wanted to know absolutely every angle that I could…I didn’t want to be surprised after I placed him with the emotions I was going through…I didn’t read a lot of books…I don’t think there was a lot of books at that time and we didn’t have the internet then but that’s why I think the counseling was so important…I picked it apart every little thing…I would show up every week and think there was nothing left to talk about and then the week would go by and I’d have other things to ask about. I’m definitely not a blunter… I looked in every nook and cranny I could and tried to find out answers.

Table 2 provides direct responses from birthmother participants recalling their own familiarity with adoption, information search behavior, and how information was involved in their decision making process and coping.

Extraordinary Ramifications
The most adamant and passionate comments came in response to the question, “What have you learned or come to understand more fully since the adoption process that you wish you had known beforehand?” Four of the five birthmothers expressed strong feelings of disappointment and even anger regarding the lack of complete disclosure of information during the adoption process illustrating the unfamiliar nature of the context. Misunderstanding and some degree of distrust in the provided information surfaced months and even years after the finalization of the adoption.

Lillian, Birthmother: I wish I would have known how shrouded in secrecy everything was…they don’t necessarily lie to you, they just don’t tell you the truth.

Angela, Birthmother: I wish I been more aware of how the relationship could be between me and the adoptive parents. There wasn’t a lot of discussion at least that I remember about the potential things that could happen…it was like we sat down and said this is how it’s going to be but then it wasn’t that way.

Angela, Birthmother: The social worker asked us [herself and adoptive family] to make a list of expectations for the

| Initial familiarity with adoption | Only as a concept, knew adoptees and adoptive parents, social work class field trip to adoption agency, media |
| Sources of information | Books about adoption (e.g. The Primal Wound, Verrier), Yellow Pages entries under ‘adoption’, social worker at adoption agency, public library, therapist, adoption lawyer family physician, friends, peers at home for unwed mothers, staff at home for unwed mothers, shepherding home, adoption support group, author of The Primal Wound, psychics |
| Sources of support | Parents, sister, social worker, friends, dorm mates, counselor, birthfather |
| Emotions experienced | Panic, denial, extreme sadness, excitement, confusion |
| Influences | Parents, birth father, social norms and stigmas, religious upbringing |
| Coping strategies | Denial, information gathering and planning, desire to understand and anticipate grief, prayer, religious/spiritual faith, desire to know every angle – no surprises |
| Missing / unknown information | Legal information about adoption, types of adoption – spectrum of open to closed adoption, things that might go wrong, no enforcement or recourse for broken promises, how closed “closed adoption” is |
| Barriers to information | Abbreviated and incomplete information about adoption options, feelings were contrary to what the information told her, court clerk |
| Recommended information for people considering adoption | Talk with other birthmother(s), talk with someone who experienced a similar crisis pregnancy and decided to parent instead of place, talk to adoptee(s), require copies of all paperwork, take time to get to know adoptive family to develop level of trust, volunteer at a day care facility to come face-to-face with reality of parenting |

Table 2. Birthmother Responses to Questions about Information Seeking Behavior.
open adoption over the years. But they didn’t hold up their end of the deal. There’s no legal...no matter how much we sit there and talk about it they aren’t required...

**Sarah, Birthmother:** When I met the adoptive parents with the social worker I said specifically that I would like pictures of my daughter at least once a year for the first five years and I thought they agreed. I had to call the agency after her first birthday to see if the pictures were in the mail – and she [social worker] said she was sending two photos but the adoptive mother wasn’t comfortable sending any more. That was actually the most excruciating moment of the entire process – I was so traumatized that I could never call back – how could they break their promise – that was all I asked for. I had no idea that any agreements from the adoptive family are not binding whatsoever.

**Lillian, Birthmother:** I wished I would have known the law...what it was like. And I wrote a letter to him [son] that was never going to be given to him...they just flat out lied to me. Well they didn’t lie outright but I wrote a letter to him and my mother wrote a letter to him and I said when he turns 18 or whatever age he might come in here please give it to him. And they put it in my file and he’s never seen it...good thing I kept a copy of it. I didn’t know the law, I didn’t know how close closed adoption was I didn’t understand this whole right to privacy thing...this confidentiality that they thought I was supposed to have because I never signed up for that. I had no idea and maybe it was in that paper I signed when I relinquished by rights that I couldn’t read because I was crying – I had no idea that he would not be able to come there (agency) at age 18 and ask for information that was no non-identifying, get my letter, get my mother’s letter.

Table 3 provides direct responses from adoption professional participants based upon their own interactions with women considering an adoption plan for their baby. Experienced adoption professionals also expressed extreme variance in how potential birthmothers seek information ranging from active to passive behavior.

**Carla, Professional:** You would think that they would want to know about the potential adoptive families...some do, some don’t.

**Alex, Professional:** Most of them don’t know the adoption options available to them and when I try to educate them some really all of a sudden want more, want more and some “I don’t even want to talk about it, my mind is already made up, I just want to get it over and done with.” So there’s that two schools – some want more more info and I’ve had...usually the ones that want more and more information then will become more and more demanding about getting their needs met. They will turn around and go back to their agency [adoption] and say “You know, wait a minute, I know I can do this and I want this. This is how it’s going to be.” And then they are more empowered. But then there are others that I try to educate and they don’t even want to go there. They’re the ones that really need to close off in order to be able to do this process [relinquish child for adoption].

**Barbara, Professional:** There are some women who have already done reading and research about adoption and know more coming into this so they would have more questions. But other women who are just more desperate have not necessarily gone beyond making a phone call to us and then just sort of put that on us to make sure we cover everything and tell them so there’s not a process in their mind.

**Far from Routine**

Echoing concerns expressed by birthmothers regarding expectations and legal issues of adoption, adoption professional participants note the importance of correct and full information.

**Alex, Professional:** I have to remind them unfortunately that no matter what option they choose and what’s agreed upon there is no legal enforcement. And they can choose a totally open adoption and they can agree to it [adoptive parents] and once that adoption is finalized if the adoptive parents choose not to go along with it...this has never been tested in court...so they should really take the time to get to know these adoptive parents so they can trust them.

| Observations about information seeking behavior of women deciding to place child for adoption | Information overload, trust social worker / adoption agency to provide all the information they need |
| What resources, people or places do women consult for information during the decision process? | Parents, friends, partners, faith leaders, internet, crisis pregnancy center, medical providers |
| Observed influences on decision making process | Peers, parents, birthfather, fear of foster care system, misinformation about adoption, |
| Observed emotional state and level of stress | Distraught, confused, frustrated, sad, angry, denial |
| Types of questions and information sought | Adoption process mechanics, information about prospective adoptive parents, what to expect, does adoption scar a child for life |
| Perceptions about what “information” ultimately helps a woman make and cope with a decision | Knowing what to expect in terms of the letting go process, understanding that none of the answers/options are really right for her but trying to choose the best under the circumstances, making a connection of trust with the adoptive family, finding support from their families, understanding the grieving process |

Table 3. Adoption Professionals Responses to Questions about Information Seeking Behavior of Birthmothers.
Information Seeking Behavior of Sperm Donor Offspring

A summary of participant information search behavior is described in the table below in Table 4.

Unfamiliar information sources

According to Savolainen (2003) a central attribute of everyday life and thus ELIS is the familiar. When sperm donor offspring seek information about their donors or their half siblings, much of the search is unfamiliar. Individuals tend to draw on familiar information sources in ELIS (Savolainen, 2003). Donor offspring are forced to stretch beyond familiar sources of information said to characterize ELIS. After being told (most often by their mother) that they were conceived via donor sperm, all donor offspring interviewed were forced to extend beyond the information provided by their mothers. Most participants interviewed expressed vividly remembering this moment because of its lifelong impact. Typically, the younger participants were when they received this information, the less impact was reported. For most, after receiving the life changing information that they were donor conceived and that they were not biologically related to their Dads, many attempted to contact their mother’s physician. If this information was not known, an effort was made to learn of the name of the mother’s physician, in order to make contact. Often, the doctor provided little information about the donor, leading to frustration:

Cindy: ...My initial conversation was with my Mom’s doctor was very much like “well, you’ve got all the forms signed by all these parties and they say we’re not going to disclose anything to anybody” and I’m think What?! “You know? I remember as a kid I was really, really angry about that because all these other people find documents and I can’t find out who my donor is? That’s bullshit!"

Paul: I hunted down the OBGYN who did the procedure, he’s actually still alive, for how much longer I don’t know. He was completely unwilling to give any information citing the fact that this was done in total secrecy as was quite common back then and that everyone was sworn to secrecy and the donor had wanted it that way as well.

Unfamiliar context

Most donor offspring began their search using the Internet. Often, the donor offspring who started their search with the Internet learned of their donor conception after 1997 when Internet search engines became widely available. While Internet search engines are currently a familiar part of everyday life for many individuals, some participants had difficulty grasping the correct terminology to enter into the search box:

Tina: I think 2 years passed before I even tried to do any sort of Internet searching. I didn’t even know the words. I didn’t even know “donor conceived.” So I had to start from the basics, “what is this?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Current age</th>
<th>Age when discovered donor conceived</th>
<th>How long after discovery did you begin searching?</th>
<th>Search period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>immediately</td>
<td>1996-1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>immediately</td>
<td>1997-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>right away</td>
<td>2009-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>immediately</td>
<td>1997-2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>a few years</td>
<td>1994-1996, 2008-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>right away</td>
<td>2003-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>less than a day</td>
<td>2009-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>right away</td>
<td>2003-2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>a few days</td>
<td>1983-1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>2007-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>2001-2003, 2009-present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly*</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>2006 (2 weeks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>1998-2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim*</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>2006 (2 weeks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>1988-1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy**</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>as early as I could remember</td>
<td>age 18</td>
<td>2003-present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Sperm donor offspring study participants

*Sisters, interviewed separately
**Unlike all other participants, Lucy was not raised originally thinking a social father was her biological father. The age at which all other participants were told that they were donor conceived (column 3) was also when they discovered they were not biologically related to their fathers.
In addition, sperm donor offspring indicated interacting with medical professionals to learn how to obtain medical records or find physicians who might have performed the artificial insemination. This was often confusing:

**Tiffany:** ...told was a friend that I'd known since I was 8 or 9 and she's actually an OB [obstetrician] so I told her because I needed her help in figuring out what kind of doctor my mom would have seen.

Many donor offspring also used yearbooks as a source of information. Both Rose and Cindy stated that they would not have thought of using yearbooks as a source of information:

**Cindy:** The only reason I wanted to know if there were yearbooks was because I was in Junior High at the time and there were yearbooks. So I thought...you know?

**Rose:** I think my mom suggested [yearbooks] because a neighbor attended my donor's medical school during the same period and had kept the books.

As they were not a familiar source of information, yearbooks can be considered an unfamiliar source of information used during the search.

**Obtaining records: an unfamiliar process**

After being told (most often by their mother) that they were conceived via donor sperm, many donor offspring attempted to obtain medical records. The process of finding the record location was sometimes confusing, as was a records retention schedule. Participants did not understand why they could not have access to records about their donor:

**Amy:** I have some image of the bowels of the hospital somewhere where maybe there are some files that they're just not telling me.

**Erin:** I initially tried to call, and they were like “we don’t know what to tell you” and then I sent an email to the actual clinic but I suspected its not the exact clinic it had been at the time and I know that the location definitely moved and they did not respond to me so my mother has gone, she took the day off of work and went up and tried to access her records at the records department. I was born in '79 and they said “you know I don't think we keep records from then.” So the man agreed to look in the archives and she had been trying to follow up with him and hasn't had any success.

**Disguised intentions: unordinary behavior**

Many donor offspring expressed that they felt the need to disguise the true nature of their search for information or expressed that they wished they had disguised the true nature of their search for fear that they would not receive all the information they requested. Not being 'open and honest' was different for them, because they were used to being open about their intentions. According to Tiffany:

When I called the University, I was very upfront with people and I realized when people weren’t calling me back that I needed to keep my mouth shut and not be quite so open. That’s one of my faults. I’m just very open with people. I don’t usually try to hide things so I’m realizing that I probably, while I’m never going to lie to anybody, I probably don’t need to be so open.

Cindy felt the need to disguise the true nature of her search for information, even though it made her uncomfortable. After looking through medical school yearbooks, Cindy was still unable to obtain information about the height and eye color of the men in the yearbook. In order to narrow down her pool of potential donors, Cindy obtained contact information for the doctors from the medical school yearbook and called the medical offices. Cindy described that a secretary would answer the phone and she would use a ‘cover story’ to obtain information:

I kind of made up a little bit of a story. I said hey I’m looking for a doctor I think it may be Dr. Smith or whoever, can you kind of just give me his physical description, how tall is he, what eye color does he have...

**I'm unordinary. Is there anyone else like me?**

After being told they were donor conceived, one of the most difficult issues for participants to address was the feeling of isolation. While some participants had a sibling who was also donor conceived, most did not and longed to know other people “like them.” Lucy expressed that early on, she thought others would think of her as a “freak” if they discover she was donor conceived. The feeling that they did not know anyone else who was donor conceived implied feelings of being unordinary. This feeling of isolation motivated many participants to seek support and many joined the PCVAI listserv at that time.

**Lucy:** I saw an Oprah episode about donor conception and at that point I was just like “oh my god, there’s other people like me out there!”

**Tina:** You know what’s funny? Beyond the online community, I have no community of other people like me.

**Sam:** You have to remember, in 1983 when I found out the truth, I thought that I was the only person who knew this

**Anne:** I first, well my mom explained it to me as artificial insemination...and I just felt like it was so surreal, this doesn’t happen to real people, like a made for TV movie or something.

**Cindy:** I think it definitely puts you in a different state of mind. I feel like I’m in a different realm from the mainstream of society, a little bit.

**Non-routine access**

According to Savolainen (2003), “the major information need areas are relatively stable” (p. 3). These areas include education; health; legal information; financial information; leisure and recreation; and public assistance. In everyday
life, laws and policies do not typically act as barriers keeping individuals from accessing this information. One of the difficulties participants had with searching for information about their donor was the fact that there were individuals standing in their way, telling them they could not have the information that they wanted. This angered many participants, as they felt like they are being denied information about their self, genetic heritage and identity:

**Tina:** I think it’s just the process itself and not really knowing what to do next is frustrating and the fact that the records aren’t kept and my mother can’t access her records either, its very frustrating. Also just that I think I get into a belief about my rights that I don’t have the right to this information, even though its about me. I don’t get my own information about my genes.

**Marie:** Secrecy, it was all about secrecy back then. My mother’s doctor, who sent her to the doctor never knew. Its all lies. Birth certificates are lies. Its all lies.

**Amy:** I spoke to the doctor who did the conception, who ran the clinic he was very clear that he didn’t think I needed to know and he set up the system to be anonymous because he felt strongly that that’s the way it needed to be. The kind of pact between the clinic and the donors, especially form that felt strongly that that’s the way it needed to be. The kind of pact between the clinic and the donors, especially form that generation, really, really overwhelmed-and with the parents as well, really overwhelmed any sense that the donor conceived children had any rights or reasons to want to know who their genetic related to.

The desire to make search more routine
Many donor offspring spoke of wanting to help other donor offspring. Lucy provides information about her search activities on her blog with the idea that another donor offspring can learn from her techniques and make her own search easier:

**Lucy:** I feel I’ve done as much as I feel I could have done, at this time to find those answers and to find siblings and I think that’s why I devote a lot of my blog to giving advice and giving ideas to other people because I feel like, you know, I want to play it forward...I feel like putting information out there about ways to do things and resources, I feel like then the next person who wants to go and search has an easier time than I did. I have 6 years of experience and advice and information on my blog. I don’t want the next person to spend 6 years finding what I found. Lucy’s comments imply that searching for information about one’s donor is not routine.

Highly emotional, deeply meaningful, profoundly personal
Many sperm donor offspring interviewed for this study used highly emotional terms to describe their feelings related to the search experience. Most participants expressed feeling frustrated and angry much of the time:

**Tiffany:** It definitely can be highly emotional, but sometimes its just so tedious going through page after page after page and just not finding anything. Its frustrating. Frustrating. Tedious. Elated. Yeah, emotional.

**Lucy:** …I think it’s a very, very vulnerable position to be in and its very emotionally draining...

Most of these feelings were expressed in relation to the lack of access to information and their frustrating over having to search for information that they believed should be easily available to them because it is so closely tied to their identity. Kate remarked: I’m not just searching for answers in my career or my love life, but now I’m searching for answers in my own identity.

Kate’s comment implies that the search for her donor is unlike a more common search for information about career or love life, information for which the general population might search.

Interview data suggests that elements of donor offspring’s search for information about their donor is not familiar, ordinary or routine. Donor offspring searching for information about their donors encounter unfamiliar sources including uncomfortable conversations with physicians. Some donor offspring have to discover the correct terminology with which to search or look for the correct specialty of doctor. After discovering the true nature of their origins, some donor offspring feel unordinary and search for others “like them.” Some donor offspring desire to make the search experience more routine and help donor offspring who start searches after them.

Overall, the lack of access to information about their donors and in turn, the lack of access to information about their identity makes the search experience more emotional. While some donor offspring consider their searches as more passive, all do not consider their search completed until they find their donor.

**CONCLUSION**

While ELIS serves as a map for navigating everyday information behavior, situations of an uncommon and unfamiliar nature may require a new basis for exploration. The two parallel studies presented here offer an opportunity to probe the boundaries of ELIS through information seeking situations involving personal crisis, legal barriers to information, social stigma and/or significant life-long impact. The first study explores information seeking behavior as a mitigating factor in decision making during a personal crisis. The context of the personal crisis involves women contemplating a decision to voluntarily relinquish their child (born or unborn) for adoption. Several factors push this information seeking situation beyond the everyday, including stress, emotion, secrecy and shame surrounding the decision process. Elements of self-efficacy and coping also challenge the stable and routine nature of ELIS. The second study explores the information search experience of sperm donor offspring who undertake a search for information about their donors and genetic origins. Offspring conceived via anonymous donor sperm
frequently experience symptoms of genealogical bewilderment (Sants, 1964; Wellisch, 1952) due to the dearth of information available to them associated with one half of their genetics. Often, these offspring are told of the nature of their conception as teens or adults, forcing them to incorporate their new understanding of themselves into existing information. To cope with the reality of being sperm donor offspring and feelings of incomplete identity members of this population search for information about donor insemination and their own genetic origins.

REFERENCES


