

## **The midwifery clinic as information ground: SSHRC project summary 2003**

The proposed study uses the concept of the “information ground,” a physical environment where information-seeking and exchange occur, to analyze the information needs, seeking, giving, and exchange taking place when Ontario midwives and their pregnant clients meet for prenatal visits. I will address specific information-seeking questions related to the physical space of the midwifery clinic and with relevance to both the everyday life information-seeking of midwifery clients and the workplace information-seeking of midwives. Specifically, how do the participants in prenatal care encounters 1) position (“assign ‘parts’ or ‘roles’ to speakers in the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person’s actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts,” Harré and van Langenhove 1999, p.17) themselves and others as information seekers and information sources, 2) use accounts of information-seeking, giving, and use to position themselves in relation to various personal or professional roles they might occupy, and 3) work together within the context of an “information ground”?

Midwifery has been a registered profession in Ontario since 1994. Ontario midwives provide fully-funded primary care for low-risk women and their babies during pregnancy, birth and for six weeks postpartum. Midwives registered through the College of Midwives of Ontario are licensed to attend low-risk births both in hospital and at home. The “midwifery model” of practice is based on a relationship in which the midwife provides the pregnant woman with information and support necessary for making informed decisions about her care. Information exchange is therefore an integral component of the midwifery model of care, making a midwife-client interaction an ideal health-care setting in which to study information-seeking and information exchange.

Traditional studies of information-seeking have often adopted a cognitive perspective, treating information seekers’ accounts as transparent and unproblematic representations of their information behaviour. This study falls within a social constructionist paradigm which puts emphasis on social practices rather than behaviour, shifting the analysis from cognitive to social and is consistent with the study of information seekers within their social context. Instead of taking individuals’ accounts as representative of internal cognitive and affective processes, a constructionist perspective requires an analysis of an account in the context of the discursive interaction in which it was produced. The account is then seen, not as a product of an individual mind, but as the product of the discursive environment in which it occurs.

I will collect and analyze a variety of accounts from 30 to 35 midwife/client pairs recruited from midwifery practices in four southwestern Ontario settings: the City of Toronto, medium-sized cities (100 000-300 000), small cities (30 000 to 100 000), and rural areas. A pilot study has collected data from midwifery practices in a large city (300 000-500 000) setting. I will audio-record an office encounter between each participating midwife and client. In the week following the office visit, I will conduct a semi-structured audio-taped follow-up interview with each participant in which I will play back the recording of the visit to stimulate discussion of each participant’s perspectives on it. Transcripts of the appointment and follow-up interviews will be analyzed in keeping with a constructionist perspective, using a discourse analytic technique (Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates 2001a, 2001b, Potter 1996, Potter and Wetherell 1987) that is

concerned with the ways that people assemble their versions of the world, and with the consequences of the descriptions they assemble: what social functions the descriptions perform, how versions become accepted as real, solid, or independent of the speaker, and how they are designed to counter real or potential alternatives.