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# Purls of wisdom

## A collectivist study of human information behaviour in a public library knitting group

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The authors aim to apply a collectivist theoretical framework to the study of human information behaviour and the construction of meaning in a knitting group held in a branch of a large Canadian (Ontario) public library.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research design was naturalistic and consisted of active participant observation of five knitting group sessions and semi-structured interviews with 12 group members. Field notes were taken, and both observations and interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Field notes and transcripts were coded qualitatively.

**Findings** – Information practices and contextual factors are mutually constitutive. The location of the circle in a public library, the physical characteristics of the act of knitting, and the social meanings of the activities taking place within the group, including the significance of gender and caring, are integrally linked to HIB in this setting. Findings are described verbally and illustrated through a model.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study applies collectivist understandings to enrich concepts such as the "information ground" that have previously been studied largely from constructivist perspectives. As a small-scale naturalistic study, results are context-specific and must be applied tentatively.

**Practical implications** – This study provides an example of how programs in public libraries can provide opportunities for information behaviour and the construction of meaning for members of the community.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes a collectivist approach to research on everyday-life information seeking and on the library as a place.

**Keywords** Information transfer, Women, Crafts, Public libraries, Communities, Canada

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

This article considers human information behaviour (HIB) and the construction of meaning in a knitting group held in a neighbourhood branch of a Canadian public library. Group participation can be seen both to fill information gaps and to fulfil participants' need to socialise, form a caring community, and participate in craft, and the knitting group is a site for collectivist information practices.

We understand HIB as taking place within a broader set of information practices, "linguistic and conversational constructions, [. . .] entities that are produced within existing discourses" (Tuominen *et al.*, 2002, p. 278). We therefore emphasise "the

concrete and situated activities of interacting people, reproduced in routine social contexts across time and space" (Rosenbaum, 1993, p. 239) and we seek to understand HIB – "a broad term covering all aspects of information seeking, including passive or undetermined information behaviour" (Spink and Cole, 2004, p. 657; see also Case, 2002) – in relation to information practices situated within collective social practices.

Theoretically, this study builds on three bases. First, we contribute to the literature in everyday-life information seeking by taking a collectivist approach to addressing the social, cultural, and physical contexts of information practices in a group setting. Second, we draw on the literature of leisure activity and, in particular, on studies of handcraft group involvement and the meaningful (and often gendered) communities they provide for members. Finally, we contribute to the discussion of the public library as a place and address the varied and sometimes unexpected ways that public libraries can contribute to HIB.

We will focus on the ways that a semi-private space created by a group of public library users becomes a discourse community and a site for information practices, and on the role of HIB in contributing to the caring atmosphere so valued by group participants. In this way we hope to achieve a greater understanding of both everyday-life information seeking and of the uses of public libraries as spaces.

## Theoretical framework

Human information behaviour has become an increasingly important research focus in LIS. HIB in everyday life has gained serious recognition since the work of Wilson (1981), who theorised about discovering information during the course of ordinary everyday activities, and Savolainen (1995), who coined the term everyday life information seeking, or ELIS. Since that time, ELIS has been studied in a variety of settings and from a number of theoretical perspectives.

A collectivist perspective understands information needs, seeking and use to be "a part of or embedded in a cultural, social, or organisational practice. Collectivist approaches question the validity of universalistic models and argue against studying 'users in general'" (Talja, 2005, p. 86). Collectivist approaches move away from the perspective of an individual user within a context, "a monologic actor affected by environmental variables" (Talja, 2005, p. 86); instead, they "aim at capturing field differences in information practices and relevance criteria" (Talja, 2005, p. 88). In other words, collectivist approaches aim at understanding the ways that discourse communities collectively construct information needs, seeking, sources, and uses. The unit of analysis in collectivism is therefore the group rather than the individual, and "attention during the research process is focused externally onto the characteristics of the environment" (Hartel, 2003, p. 233).

The environment in our case is textile handwork – knitting – performed jointly by women in a Canadian public library branch. A brief introduction to each of these elements will contextualise the ways that participants in a specific local setting understand information needs, seeking, and use within a broader discourse community.

## The environment: leisure and textile handwork

Hartel (2003) argues that studies of everyday life information seeking have focused on "sombre" situations, such as those "in which access to information is perceived as

compromised or there is a major life change like an illness" (Hartel, 2003, p. 229). She calls for scholarly consideration of the informational aspects of leisure activities, and suggests a collectivist analysis using the work of Robert Stebbins as a starting point.

Hartel (2003) advocates the adoption by LIS scholars of Stebbins' concept of serious leisure: "the systematic pursuit of an activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge" (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). Stebbins distinguishes serious leisure from casual leisure, "activity that is done passively and requires no expertise, such as daydreaming, chatting with friends, or being a couch potato" (Hartel, 2003, p. 230).

Although Stebbins' critique of dichotomous understandings of work and leisure is particularly useful to ELIS, his distinctions between work, serious leisure, and casual leisure may not be appropriate in all cases. Aitchison, (2003, p. 41) argues that defining leisure in relation to full-time paid work:

> [. . .] has traditionally meant defining leisure in relation to men's work and therefore only offers a useful definition to a minority of women as the majority is not engaged in full-time paid work. . . Thinking of leisure as free time is also problematic for women whose freedom may be relative freedom dependent on the financial support of a male partner or free time constrained by the need to provide support and care for others.

Researchers are beginning to pay serious scholarly attention to hidden, unwaged, and often marginalised forms of work, particularly caring work, done in the course of what might be considered serious or casual leisure activities; for example, feeding the family (DeVault, 1991), engaging in small talk (Coates, 2000; Green, 1998; Tardy, 2000), or participating in crafts such as textile handwork (Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell, 2001; Piercy and Cheek, 2004; Cerny *et al.*, 1993).

Visser (1994, p. 13) observed that handwork in particular is marginalised:

> [M]any people nowadays seem to think of "crafts" as an amusement for primary-school children, when it is not a therapeutic device or a harmless activity to while away the time. The word "crafts" has come to be used for hobbies, outlets for creativity. And crafts that are not done for money are by that very token, in the modern world, activities not to be taken seriously. Such crafts are practiced in merely free (that is not working, and not paid) time. . . Where "craft" is used to denote skill expended on things handmade for normal, everyday use, the connotation can still be patronizing, for "art" (a term unquestionably of praise) has been reserved since the nineteenth century for things, chiefly painting and sculpture, made, not to be used, but only contemplated for their beauty; it also became a term for the skill required to make them.

Canadians have a long tradition of handcraft, including knitting, as both work and leisure (Scott, 1991), and knitters have ascribed many kinds of meaning to the activity. Knitters who worked from home to provide garments for a non-profit distribution network claimed that they knit neither for the small income nor as a creative outlet. Rather, they saw knitting as an activity that enabled them to avoid idle time, a means of occupying the mind to stave off worry or loneliness, a link with past and future generations, an appropriate demonstration of their competence as women and mothers, and a source of accomplishment and pride as they decoded a difficult pattern or finished a garment. A finished handwork project therefore serves as a physical

manifestation of a knitter's effort, talent, and productive use of time (Stalker and Harling, 2000).

Knitters also identified the practice of knitting as both a gendered occupation and a collective pursuit, whether undertaken alone or in the company of others (Macdonald, 1988). Knitters often create functional items for friends and family and there exists a long tradition of knitting for charity: during World War I, men and women alike knitted items such as socks and balaclavas for soldiers, and the Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey provided sailors with sweaters, scarves, and watchcaps (Macdonald, 1988; Scott, 1991). Recently the "Afghans for Afghans" program (Afghans for Afghans, 2005) has sent many knitted blankets, some of which were collaborative efforts, to Afghanistan.

Although often practised alone, knitting is an activity increasingly undertaken by people in groups. The role of craft in creating communities and identity, especially among women, has attracted the attention of researchers in various disciplines. Textile guilds are fairly formal and organised, with regular meetings where members meet to work on and discuss current projects. Some guilds provide formal educational programs and workshops, and the combination of novice, experienced, and master crafters in the guild setting allows members both to participate in a leisure activity and to interact with and learn from others sharing a common interest in a craft. (See Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell, 2001; Piercy and Cheek, 2004; Cerny *et al.*, 1993). A number of knitting guilds are active in Canada (Canadian Knitwear Designers and Artisans, 1998-2004).

### The environment: joint engagement in activity

There is a growing tradition in LIS research of studying the ways that "people find information unexpectedly as they engage in other activities" (Williamson, 1998, p. 24) such as reading newspapers (Savolainen, 1995), or chatting informally (Williamson, 1998). Research on information seeking (Foster, 2005) and information behaviour (Wilson, 1999) is increasingly taking this dimension into account as, for example, in Pettigrew's (1999) and Brown's (2001) studies of the exchange of human service information in seniors' foot care clinics and beauty salons.

The concept of the "information ground" ("an environment temporarily created by the behaviour of people who have come together to perform a given task, but from which emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information." (Pettigrew, 1999, p. 811; see also Fisher, 2006)) provides a starting point for a collectivist analysis. Collectivism can enrich the "information ground" concept by providing a deeper understanding of the nature of the other activities performed and of the cultural, social, or organisational practice of the discourse communities in which they are embedded.

Ethnographies of people's activities in public and semipublic places (e.g. Wiseman, 1979; Kenen, 1982), have addressed the ways that groups of people come together collectively to understand and interact within a domain. For example, both a foot care clinic and a beauty salon could be conceptualized as close-contact service encounters (McCarthy, 2000); participants' activities are performed in fairly intimate physical proximity in a room where other dyads are doing the same thing. McCarthy (2000) found that hairdressing salons provided an interactional environment in which casual conversation is facilitated (e.g. a fairly standard set of phases such as an initial

discussion of how the hair is to be cut followed by hair washing and then cutting; and long periods of activities that create little background noise). However, "the field is circumscribed by those topics relevant to the business at hand, and to topics that construct and reconstruct the satisfactory ongoing client-server relationship" (McCarthy, 2000, p. 96). Researchers in other hair salons found that both the patterns and the topics of conversation varied depending on the type and location of the salon and its clientele, but few such studies of social interaction (see Tardy, 2000, for example) have addressed questions of interest to HIB researchers.

A collectivist analysis of information practices in a public or semiprivate locale can provide insight into the nature of such broader contextual characteristics, and can analyse the ways that these might facilitate or constrain information seeking, or might themselves be enhanced or hampered by the seeking of information. While the "information ground" aims to provide generalisable propositions about the kinds of HIB occurring when people come together, a collectivist approach attends to the particularities of a discourse community: the specific constructions of activity, information needs, seeking, and sources in local interactional settings. Such settings vary considerably and our goal is to theorise the relationship between a specific physical and social setting and its information practices.

## The environment: women in a Canadian neighbourhood public library branch

Despite their prevalence among public library users, little is known about the ways that women make use of the physical space, resources, and social environment of the public library. Elsewhere (McKenzie, 2006) we have analysed library use by this knitting group and a group of women attending a child/caregiver story time in the same public library branch. We identified several physical, social, and organisational characteristics of women's use of this space.

First, a public library programme room is not a value-free place. Participants who choose to be there share a number of characteristics of which they may not be aware. They have at some level chosen to be present in a public library and, in this particular case, in a library branch in a fairly affluent neighbourhood, and they behave in ways that permit them to remain. Participants in a weekday library programme are by definition aware of the programme, interested in participating, and able to get to the library and participate during normal working hours. A participant's appearance and behaviour provides clues about her age, taste, income, and level of experience: for example, the complexity of the knitting project chosen and the degree to which she asks for assistance. Relationships among strangers entering the programme room are therefore facilitated because participants may identify one another as likely having interests and preferences in common simply by walking into the room.

Second, both programmes support activities consistent with traditional women's work. When participants jointly engage in this work, the public space of the programme room becomes a site for the sharing of activities, the shared enactment of women's identities, and the performance of caring. Women came to the library programmes at the invitation of friends and, conversely, relationships begun in the programme room extended beyond it.

Finally, the rearrangement of the generic programme room to accommodate each group's activity means that the physical space becomes a different sort of social space

for each new programme. In addition to the physical arrangements, the organisation of the public library itself and its relation to extra-local social and political organisations has a role in coordinating the activities taking place within the library's walls.

We found that, together, these physical and social elements had several implications for women's use of public library spaces. Because our public library-hosted knitting circle is the site for the communal practice of textile handwork, we argue that it is therefore simultaneously a site for both serious and casual leisure, as well as for work. In addition, the social meaning of knitting, the characteristics of knitting as a physical act, and the parallel performance of a similar activity by a number of people have implications for the ways that members of this setting engage in information practices. The themes of gender, leisure, work, public, and private, all intertwine in this setting and contribute to the discourse community in which activities (including HIB) take place. Our study, therefore, focuses on the interconnections between context, discourse community, and information practices within a specific setting.

## Research questions

Our analysis in this article addresses the following questions:

*RQ1*. What kinds of HIB take place in a knitting group held in a public library?

*RQ2*. How does the public library setting contribute to HIB and the information practices of the discourse community?

*RQ3*. How does the activity of knitting contribute to HIB?

*RQ4*. What meaning does the group hold or provide for participants and how do these relate to information practices?

## Research design

To explore these questions we conducted a naturalistic participant observation study assisted by audio recording and followed by semi-structured interviews. The study received ethical approval from The University of Western Ontario and adheres to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Public Works and Government Services, 2003) and we have used pseudonyms throughout to protect anonymity.

Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 229-31) suggest that a naturalistic approach is appropriate when the phenomena under study are represented by a multiplicity of complex interactions, are characterised by a high degree of both investigator-phenomenon interaction and context dependence, and are difficult to explain by ascribing conventional causal connections. Researchers undertaking a naturalistic inquiry accept that:

- realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic;
- knower and known are interactive, inseparable;
- only time- and context-bound working hypotheses (idiographic statements) are possible;
- all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping, so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects; and
- inquiry is value-bound (Lincoln, 1985, pp. 36-8).

Accordingly, we have employed several methodological practices that facilitate naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln, 1985, pp. 39-44). First, we collected data in a natural setting. Second, we as the researchers were the major research instruments. Third, data analysis was inductive, and the research design was emergent. Our foci of observation, analytical coding categories and frameworks, and the questions we asked in the interviews evolved as the analysis progressed. Fourth, data interpretation has been idiographic, striving to find patterns rather than causes and effects. Finally, the great strength of naturalistic inquiry is its sensitivity to individual contexts; its corresponding weakness is that findings from any single study cannot be widely generalised. We recognise our findings to be context-dependent, and we therefore apply them tentatively.

**Data collection**

Between September and December 2004, one or both of us observed a total of five sessions of a knitting group that met year-round on a weekday afternoon at a branch library of a large (>100,000) Ontario public library system. At the time of our observation the group was comprised entirely of women, ranging in age from approximately mid-thirties to mid-eighties. The number of participants on any day ranged from 13 to more than 20 knitters and meetings lasted approximately two hours.

In order to gain access to the group, we sought permission from the library system, the branch, and the group itself. We made a short presentation of the research goals and methods to the group, and provided members with letters of information and consent forms. Only the activities of knitters who had given their consent were observed, recorded, and transcribed.

Participant observation takes a naturalistic approach to observation with "ongoing and intensive observing, listening, and speaking" (McCormack Steinmetz, 1991, p. 42). Participant observation is the most appropriate form of data collection for a collectivist study of ELIS as it allows participant-observers to participate first-hand in HIB in the natural setting, rather than solely relying on the memories and descriptive abilities of participants in interviews. For this study, we both participated actively in the knitting group, recording our observations once we left the library. Active participants have "a job to do in the setting in addition to the research" (McCormack Steinmetz, 1991, p. 45). The "job" in this case was knitting, and through knitting while observing a number of advantages are attained.

The role of the observer is also that of the apprentice (McCormack Steinmetz, 1991) where the participant-observer is learning not only through observing, but also through direct contact with fellow participants and the expertise shared. In this way, we were able to experience HIB in the natural setting of the group. Also, by knitting, we were able to achieve insider status thereby gaining and sustaining access to the members of the knitting group (Carey *et al.*, 2001; Jorgensen, 1989) and building trust (Lincoln, 1985).

We recorded field notes about the physical environment, the activity of the session, and the situation of the knitting group participants in addition to the information shared among participants. Field notes were completed as soon as possible upon leaving the knitting group sessions. In addition, we audio taped each session and transcribed these for analysis. We attended to participants' comfort levels during the audio-taping, and chose unobtrusive locations (e.g. on the floor under the table, on a

shelf in the corner of the room) to minimise their obtrusiveness. We found, as McCormack Steinmetz did, that "after a short while, people relax and seem to be unaware of the tape recorder" (McCormack Steinmetz, 1991, p. 82).

Following our observation, we conducted individual interviews with a convenience sample of 12 knitting group participants. We originally planned to interview a smaller, purposive sample, but after being involved with the group for several weeks we became aware that limiting the number of interviews might appear to value the contributions of some knitters over others, and might adversely affect relationships among group members. We therefore decided to interview any participants who were willing. The interviews were semi-structured, and we developed the questions following the first few observation sessions based on our observations to that point. These included general questions about the interviewees' identities as knitters, what impact the group has had on their lives knitting and otherwise, and what it is about the group that influences them to return week after week. The interview guide from which we worked can be found in Appendix A. Interviews varied in length between ten minutes and one hour. We audio taped and transcribed the interviews.

## Data analysis

The first author performed the initial qualitative coding of session and interview transcripts and field notes and identified themes related to the research questions (Strauss and Corbin, 1991). She used N-Vivo Qualitative Research Software to assist in the analysis. This initial code set included categories for method notes, topics discussed by the knitters, (described more fully in our findings section), the manner of communication (e.g. storytelling, chatting, gossip, information seeking or sharing, referral, teaching), relationships within the group (e.g. talk about the backgrounds of members, history of the group, meaning of the group, roles of individuals within the group, caring, community, identity as a knitter, meaning of the group, role of teaching), and about the handcraft and activities related to it (e.g. show and tell, productivity, and "hands", which we used when we wanted to make note of what knitters' hands were doing as they were talking or listening). These initial categories were useful for bringing together like instances and allowing us to compare single instances over time or across individuals. Our analysis developed as we collected more data, examined and re-examined our previous experiences both individually and collectively, created memos and diagrams to describe our analysis, and presented our emergent findings to the knitters themselves as a form of member checking. The analysis presented here and the diagram appearing as Figure 1 is therefore the outcome of many months of collective refinement of the initial coding process.

A major concern with the analysis and presentation of qualitative data is the establishment of the validity of the coding scheme and thereby of the analysis that emerges from it. Drawing from the tradition of content analysis, some writers on qualitative research methods suggest that the validity of qualitative studies will be increased by verifying the inter-subjectivity of the assignment of codes through such measures as inter-coder reliability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that "trustworthiness" is a more appropriate measure for evaluating qualitative research than the quantitatively-based "reliability" and "validity". Trustworthiness is a measure of the rigour of naturalistic research, "established through techniques that provide truth value through credibility, applicability through transferability,

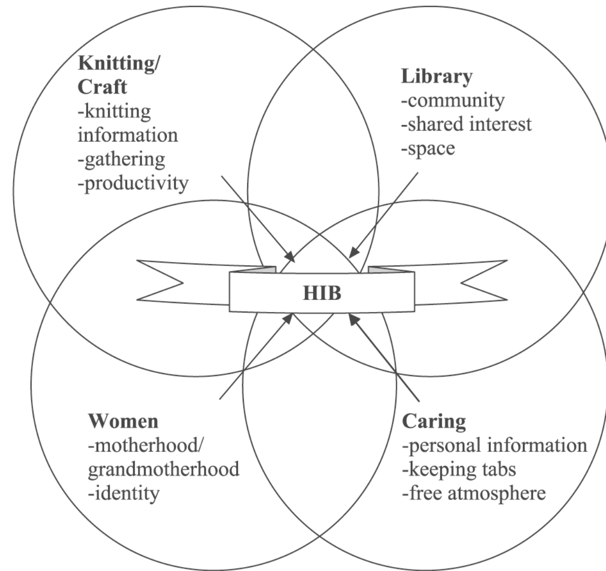


**Figure 1.**
Model of factors affecting human information behaviour (HIB) in the public library knitting group

consistency through dependability, and neutrality through confirmability" (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993, p. 132).

We have used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggested means for establishing trustworthiness in naturalistic studies:

- *Prolonged engagement*: We participated in the knitting group over the course of several weeks, and we continued to attend meetings when possible even after we had completed the data collection.
- *Learning the context*: Both of us have been recreational knitters for many years. The first author has worked in a knitting shop in the community in which we observed and in fact some of the participants recognised her from this role.
- *Building trust:* Our own skills as knitters and our full participation in conversations allowed us to be legitimate participants in the group. We received confirmation of our acceptance during the weeks when one or other of us was absent, the first author for a job interview and the second author for other data collection. On these occasions the knitters always asked where the other researcher was and how she was doing.
- *Member checking:* We present emerging analysis to participants for their reflection (see the excerpts from the interview with participant 15 in our discussion).
- *Peer debriefing:* We discussed our observations, interviews, and our ongoing analysis at length over the course of several months both during and after the data collection period. We sought comparisons and looked for both confirming and contradictory evidence in the work of other researchers both in LIS and elsewhere.

Finally, we ensured several forms of triangulation:

- of participants through multiple interviews;
- of methods through a combination of observation and interviews; and
- of settings through ongoing comparison with a study of another group of women using this same public library space (see McKenzie *et al.*, 2006).

Thus, although the analysis we present here began with the initial coding set, it is the result of many months of joint reflection on the data, on the emerging analysis, and on the research process.

## Results: types of HIB in the knitting group

The knitting circle met in one of two programme rooms located within the library yet separate from the browsing and administrative areas. Knitters sat around a long table placed in the middle of the room. The table held work in progress, patterns and diagrams, skeins of yarn, extra needles, finished projects, and sometimes cups of coffee. A storage cabinet in one of the rooms was allocated to the group and held some supplies. While the group centred on knitting, on occasion other crafts were practised or displayed. Most knitters sat in the same region of the table, if not the same seat, every week they attended.

The knitting circle had been operating for almost 10 years, almost entirely in the same library branch. One member was responsible for starting the group and still organised it. Her description of the group's evolution illustrates the relationship between serious leisure (knitting) and casual leisure (chatting), and shows how the balance between the two, and the consequent information-seeking focus, changed over time:

> I was just fresh from 30 years of teaching, and I guess I saw it more as a teaching thing. And at that time I used to bring in people to show them about dyeing yarns, and I brought in people who were, who had no, like, I mean, somebody who was a fibre artist who knits figures and that. But I discovered though that, they weren't necessarily interested in that. They just wanted to visit with each other and compare knitting. Sometimes it was hard to get them to be quiet when we had a guest in. And so I thought, "hmmm, okay, we don't need to do that". Once in a while I'll come across somebody with an idea, and, like, you know, once I had somebody come in and show them how to hook rugs, and things like that. But you know, they're mildly interested in that. The knitting, it's become more, I think, of a women's support group.

Each group meeting followed a similar pattern. At the beginning of the meeting the organiser or another member typically called the group to attention. During this time, knitters shared news of former members, on one occasion reading an e-mail message aloud. They discussed plans for group activities such as the annual holiday lunch or knitting for a charity, or announced of community events including local and nearby knitting and craft shows or upcoming library activities. Although this was the most formal part of the meeting, spontaneous informal conversation might also occur:

> One of the announcements was to tell us that she'd obtained a group discount card from [chain craft shop], that if we gave any local location the name of the group we'd get a 10 percent discount. [Group organiser] had written the name and information on one of her cards, which she passed around. Someone on the left end of the table talked about whether her

personal membership gave her a better discount so she didn't need to take a card, but someone else suggested that maybe she could combine the discounts. There was much discussion about what the group's name was, and [Group organiser] quizzed the group on the name and had us repeat it. [Knitter to my left] said "That name's too long. We should be called something shorter like Hell's Angels." Laughter. She and I joked about knitting leather [Field notes – PM].

During the announcement period, anyone with a finished project was invited to show and talk about it to the assembled group.

Following the announcements and show and tell, participants knit and had informal conversations in pairs, trios, or groups as large as the entire circle. As might be expected, much of the information and resource sharing surrounded the primary activity of the group: knitting. Knitters compared notes about specific materials and sometimes traded patterns and other materials. They passed around finished projects, and books and newspaper articles on a variety of topics, sometimes systematically circulating them, sometimes placing them in the middle of the table and retrieving them as needed. On one occasion, a member of the group brought in 100 or more magazines and pattern booklets to share, most of which were taken by the end of the session. Those having difficulty asked others for knitting assistance. Some members in the group were approached more often than were others, but everyone we observed being asked was willing to help as much as possible. Participants described their knitting-related information seeking in the interviews:

*Investigator:* So if somebody has a question, who is it that they usually go to?

*Knitter 1:* To Knitter 2, or to all the girls can help. Everyone [is] very beautiful here. I can ask, you know, or actually first [I go to] Knitter 2, but any girls can help. They're very nice.

*Investigator:* Is there anybody people mostly go to for advice, or that you've mostly gone to advice?

*Knitter 3:* There's quite a few actually. We help out each other, cause um, I mean when we first started [one knitter] was the one that we went to, but then as more joined . . . I mean for example today I needed some advice about a little dog sweater I'm making.

*Investigator:* With the spots.

*Knitter 3:* With my spots, and so I went. . . I knew [another knitter] does a lot of, and so you know, we've kind of clued in on who can help us with what.

Experienced members of the knitting circle served as expert information sources for those with less experience. Knitters provided both solicited and unsolicited advice on patterns, materials and techniques. They also discussed a wide variety of other topics. Our field notes identified conversations about health (colds, vaccines, surgeries, chronic illness, falls, end-of-life planning), books, family (particularly parenting and grand-parenting), consumer information, current events, political activism and charitable activities, community information, and animal behaviour, as well as a variety of personal anecdotes.

Such conversations could vary fluidly between dyads or triads and larger groups. Our most notable example was a discussion that took place over a period of two weeks. It began when an octogenarian knitter initiated a discussion with the first author about

her recent experience in planning her own funeral. A lengthy one on one conversation then evolved into a group announcement:

> Same individual called group's attention, spoke about details of planning funeral, and told group about open house at funeral chapel, how the girl who helped her there was young and nice, how there would be free lunch at the open house. Did not recall date [Field notes – EP].

The following week, this knitter brought some flyers, which she distributed. This brought on a discussion about other peoples' experiences with planning, or not planning, funerals. An excerpt from the second week's field notes gives an indication of the number of participants and the range of the discussion:

> Knitter 4 brought in flyers.
>
> I asked where she got them – girl from chapel gave them to her.
>
> Knitter 5 didn't want to hear about it, left room (not sure if because of funeral talk though).
>
> Other people wanted flyers – Knitters 6, 7 and 8.
>
> Knitter 9 – said she and her husband had talked about it at length after last week.
>
> *Hands:* ½ knitting, ½ not – listening.
>
> Knitter 10 noted that the open house is only for those above 60 – was peeved. Wondered why chapel would dissuade under 60s from attending – don't they want people to plan early?
>
> Elena recalled Knitter 11's conversation from last week – wondered why they wouldn't want under 60s.
>
> Knitter 12 said when friend's parent died, had planned funeral themselves but daughter was told that she would have to pay for engraving the date of death on the tombstone, and will fight this.
>
> Other people chimed in.
>
> Knitter 6 (?) knew someone with the same experience.
>
> Knitter 4 said she is not trying to push the idea, but that they were nice there. Knitter 13 said she would have the city bury her[1]. (Was pretty quiet today).
>
> Canada Pension Plan gives money for funeral.
>
> *Knitter 10:* when I buried my mother.' Got around $250 - $275 from CPP. Was not much although her mother had worked for 30 years.
>
> Knitter 7 – from [another province], got $2,000 to pay for mother's funeral.
>
> Also talked about cost of cremation – Knitter 10 said $6,000.
>
> *Hands:* everyone knitting [Field notes – EP].

This entire conversation covered a wide variety of the kinds of HIB issues typically studied by researchers: consumer information, referrals to community information sources and social service information. It also illustrates several active and incidental forms of HIB that have been discussed by researchers. However, we propose to go further to explore the relationship between the HIB taking place within the knitting

circle and important contextual factors: the location of the circle in a public library, the characteristics of the act of knitting, and the social meanings of the activities taking place within the circle, including the significance of gender and caring.

Figure 1 shows the complex relationships among the physical, social, and cultural contexts in which the knitting circle operates. The remainder of this article will describe the complex ways in which these factors and the information practices of the circle exist "in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping" (Lincoln, 1985, pp. 36-38).

## The public library and HIB

As we have described in more detail elsewhere (McKenzie *et al.*, 2006) and summarised above, the fact that the knitting circle meets in a public library programme room has implications for the kinds of people likely to be present within the room and the shared values of the group. Public libraries "offer space and facilities for groups of people to meet and undertake a variety of activities, meaning that users will often encounter and interact with those outside their usual social circle" (Goulding, 2004, pp. 4-5), and our participants speculated about the similarities and differences among members:

> *Knitter 3:* I find that one of the interesting dynamics of the group, there's really different socio-economic members in the group. There's probably different educational levels in the group, but those aren't blatant. When the conversation's going around the table, I find there's a lot of common denominators. Even when it comes to books and movies. Everybody around that table seems to have something to contribute, because somebody who maybe isn't as well read is an exceptional knitter, so I think the individual talents in the group really come through.

Involvement with the public library was what brought many knitters to the group in the first place. Several learned of the group in the library's newsletter or from librarians themselves:

> *Investigator:* Okay, so can you tell me about how you started coming to the knitting group?
>
> *Knitter 9:* Yeah, we had just moved to town, and when you're a senior it's kind of hard to make contact, you know, people of similar interest. But the library has been our home away from home. And I just saw the notice "are you interested in knitting?' and one Thursday I just plucked up my courage and I just came. And that was three or four years ago, and I've been coming ever since.

Leckie and Given's extensive review of the literature on information seeking and public libraries states that "in the context of a public library, informing is most likely to happen through users' interactions with texts (i.e. print, images, sound and other media, in hard copy or in digital form), and with human intermediaries (such as librarians and other patrons)" (Leckie, 2005, p. 3). Our field notes document the use of library materials:

> Knitter 14 had a book out open in front of her, *Knitting without tears*, with a library spine label. We talked about it and she said she'd been needing some help and Knitter 2 suggested this book and it's been helpful but sometimes it's hard to follow the instructions. She had the book open to a section on heels, German heel and some other kind [fieldnotes – PM].

and resources: "Knitter 2 left to photocopy something from my magazine" [Field notes – EP]. In addition, they supplemented the library's collection with their own materials. "Knitter 7 lent Knitter 4 a book of poetry. Knitter 4 has book on hold from library – has 200 holds on it" [Field notes – EP].

In the course of the interview, the knitters described their use and appreciation of the public library.

*Investigator:* do you have a library card?

*Knitter 9:* I most certainly do.

*Investigator:* now you said, when you moved to town the library was your home away from home.

*Knitter 9:* Yeah.

*Investigator:* So how do you use the library?

*Knitter 9:* Well, just to pick up books, and movies sometimes. And sometimes I read magazines if they're there.

*Investigator:* And you come to the knitting circle.

*Knitter 9:* . . .my husband comes to [another] program. It's something he's just taken up since we've moved to town.

*Investigator:* Um, so since you live in the neighborhood is this the branch you come to?

*Knitter 9:* Yes it is, and almost invariably. I've been to the central one. And I haven't really investigated it yet, but no, the staff [here] are just so wonderful. They recommend books, you know you would like this, or try this author, or they'll hold movies because they think we'll like it. And they just spoil us and we love it.

*Knitter 3:* I like the atmosphere of the library too. I've always been a library person, and I like coming to the library, I like the fact that after you knit you can get your books or whatever you want.

Although the knitters came from a variety of backgrounds their participation in this group signalled a shared commitment to the library and its functions as well as a commitment to knitting as an activity.

## Role of knitting as an activity

The physical act of knitting both facilitated and constrained HIB in the knitting circle. Participants at knitting groups are participating in handwork – their hands are busy but their minds can easily stray to other matters. In this way knitting is conducive to chatting, and chatting is justified because participants are still being productive. For this reason, knitting groups are increasingly termed "Stitch & Bitch' since participants can use the gathering to share not only skills but everyday life information and human services information.

Lydon (1997, p. 3) described the use of knitting in a Vipassana Buddhist meditation class. During the first hour of the class, participants did needlework in silence. During the second hour of the class, participants continued to work on their projects while also "speaking deeply to the others about their lives". The meditation teacher observed that, "everyone agreed that the hour of concentration practice was what allowed us to share so deeply" (Lydon, 1997, p. 3).

Knitting as a physical activity is also visible to other participants. Others can see what a project looks like, how much progress has been made, and how confidently (or

tentatively) the knitter is working. The shared activities and supplies associated with a project in the knitting circle, including the pattern, yarn and ongoing handwork served as non-threatening conversation starters. Knitters generally received an inquiry about their knitting project as supportive: "Everyone asked what I was knitting at beginning of session, showed what they were working on" [EP field notes]. Such a query could lead either to a discussion of the materials and technique or to further conversations on a variety of subjects:

> Knitter 10 talked about knitting this pink sweater for her daughter who's in [faraway city]. She'd intended to get it done by the time her daughter came home for Thanksgiving but she'd have to send it. Some discussion about her daughter: did she come home? No, she stayed there, she and some friends went to [American location]. They're two hours from the US. It's a great opportunity for her. Later on someone asked Knitter 10 "Was your daughter homesick to come home?" "No, she's got these new friends. One friend is from [nearby city] and two are from [European country], two more from somewhere else." I asked whether she knew people when she got there, Knitter 10 said "No, she went not knowing anybody and has made friends with these girls." [Field notes – PM].

Although the visibility and regularity of knitting as an activity facilitated simultaneous casual conversation, the relationship between knitting and talking depended on the skill of the knitter, the complexity of the project, and on what was being said. For example, during the announcement period, most participants tried to make eye contact with the speaker and their ability to do this while knitting determined whether they set their work aside:

> When people make announcements to the whole group, many (most) will put their knitting down, make eye contact with the speaker. Eventually, will pick up knitting again. Knitter 4 hardly knits at all [EP field notes].

> [Group organizer] made several announcements at the beginning, and I thought about what I did with my knitting. I was on a wrong-side row and was able to attend and knit and still make enough eye contact. When I got to the end of that row I put my knitting on the table because I knew I could no longer make that eye contact and knit cables at the same time [PM field notes].

During more casual discussions, participants kept knitting for the most part and worried less about making eye contact, as is evident from the field notes describing the funeral planning discussion above. The exception to this practice, Knitter 14, was working on a project that tested her skills. The difficulty of the project both led this knitter to borrow a book from the library (see above) and to remove herself physically from the group during casual conversation to isolate herself from the distraction: "Knitter 14 – concentrating on socks, pulled her chair back. Someone asked Pam what she was doing, Pam said she was concentrating on her socks" [EP field notes].

The physical characteristics of knitting as an activity therefore played a role in both facilitating and impeding HIB for the participants in the knitting circle. The practices of knitting and of knitting in a group also carry social meanings that further relate to the information practices in this collective setting.

## Social meaning of group activities

Tuominen and Savolainen (1996) analysed the ways that previously received or sought information is discursively constructed or designed for accomplishing pragmatic social

action. We argue that the HIB taking place within the knitting circle becomes information practice as it takes several kinds of social action related to three social meanings of producing textile handwork in a group setting.

First, studies of women's participation in textile handcraft guilds have found that group participation has social meaning in relation to the physical textile object and its production. Textile objects themselves carry significance, and the hand crafting of objects contributes to women's individual development (creativity, aesthetics, technical skill, management of materials and time (Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell, 2001, p. 42). Second, guild participation enables the sharing of common interests, values, and traditions and the development of a group identity as a handcrafter (Cerny *et al.*, 1993; Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell, 2001, p. 46). These two meanings are interrelated: producing hand-made goods may provide participants with a sense of success at producing something of value and worth, and with a sense of connection with other crafters that enables them both to learn from and to mentor others (Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell, 2001).

A third meaning is related to the friendships made through membership in textile handcraft guilds, which may be as important to members as the activity itself (Piercy and Cheek, 2004, p. 31). Green (1998, pp. 176-7) argued that women's talk in leisure contexts, particularly those with other women, serves both as a prime site of leisure and as a forum for self empowerment and autonomy.

Producing textile handcrafts simultaneously shows the woman's uniqueness through her crafting ability and her relationship to a community, both the historical and contemporary crafting community from whom she learns patterns and techniques, and a larger community of family, friends, and other community groups with whom she shares the fruits of her labours (Carey *et al.*, 2001, pp. 23-4; Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell, 2001, p. 42).

Schofield-Tomschin (2001, p. 43) argues that the creation of material objects accomplishes generativity, the guiding and nurturing of the next generation and the continuation of traditions and institutions. The sharing of patterns and techniques in a guild begins "a natural cycle of the craft benefiting the informant; thereby contributing to active participation in the guild which ultimately provided impetus for more individual craft production" (Schofield-Tomschin, 2001, p. 49). The sharing of information about patterns and techniques is an integral part of this cycle and serves to further the social bonds with other knitters both past and present (Cerny *et al.*, 1993, p. 23; Piercy and Cheek, 2004).

In the knitting circle we observed a pattern being shared visually, through the display of the finished product, as well as orally through the telling of the pattern and the situating of the pattern within the history of the group:

> Someone brought up a woman known to many here who has a diabetic husband and knits socks for him. The story was told at least twice that she makes all her husband's socks and when his doctor saw them he liked them so much that he asked her to knit for him and now she makes all the doctor's socks too. Someone near me was wearing socks from this pattern, cream colour with a single cable twist on the front, each side, and back. I did hear Knitter 2 explaining to someone (Elena?) that the pattern had originated in this group, (was perhaps hers?) and she basically told the pattern to her listener. You knit four times something with a twist and then it's all the same. But when you get to the foot you only do the cable along the top so that it doesn't cause wear on the bottom of the sock [field notes – PM].

The formal display of handcrafted items in a guild setting additionally demonstrates the crafter's ability to manage time and materials, her technical and aesthetic skill, and her socialization, as the handwork was accomplished through affiliations with other crafters (Cerny *et al.*, 1993, p. 22): "[Knitter] showed afghan – stood up, held it, people were amazed" [Field notes – EP].

Even apart from the formal show-and-tell we participated in the assessment of one another's progress on our projects, both positively: "Knitter 14 was still working on her grey socks. I commented on how much she'd got done" [Field notes – PM].

And negatively:

> *Investigator:* Do you ever feel like you, have to produce a certain amount to come here? Because for me, I thought, [because I've missed a couple of meetings], I thought "well I'd better knit something".
>
> *Knitter 15:* So they won't be . . . [laughs].
>
> *Investigator:* So they know that I'm really serious about being here.
>
> *Knitter 15:* Yeah, not just a pretend knitter [laughing] Well sometimes I did think, "oh, I can't bring that in again" especially I wasn't able to knit for a month because I had some things that I started in the summer that aren't finished, and I was embarrassed to bring around. Yeah, I guess sometimes I have a little bit of that, you know.

Projects also demonstrated caring as knitters talked about the project or the person for whom they knit, as in the example of knitter 10's daughter above.

Finally, the sharing of knitting-related information could be seen to constitute a different kind of caring: "Through their craft production, the women assumed the role of caretaker to the craft, and a promoter of its continuation" (Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell, 2001, p. 47). Knitter 2 expressed her dismay at the attempt to turn knitting into a solely commercial enterprise by some knitting shops:

> I bought some fancy yarn. And they're handing out flyers about, "Do you have a problem, and we'll charge you $15 for 10 minutes help" and that sort of thing. I hate to see that happen among women! I really do. I hate to see what, to me, what is a cultural skill, become a commercial thing . . . And so, I think that those are just skills that should just be matter of fact for women.

For Knitter 2, freely providing technical knitting information and help served both as care for women and as care for the craft itself and the free sharing of women's craft knowledge.

## HIB and social interaction in the knitting circle

The knitting circle is therefore simultaneously the site for knitting and for chatting, for serious leisure and for casual leisure and, through both of those activities, for the work of caring for self and others. HIB in this setting relates both to the official purpose of the group (knitting), to other topics arising in conversation, and to information related to relational work.

When we asked participants what topics are discussed at the knitting group, a first common answer was "anything and everything."

> *Investigator:* So what kind of things do you talk about at the knitting circle?

*Knitter 9:* Anything and everything, really. We talk about books, and, I notice people pass books back and forth, and good movies, um.

*Investigator:* All right. Um, what kinds of topics do you discuss at the knitting circle?

*Knitter 10:* [laughs] I bet you've had a lot of weird answers on this one…

Um, oh my gosh. It's been health, death, um, illness, well I guess that's health, um, depending on someone's stories you've got um, jokes, a lot of some of the older ladies have some really cool stories they tell which is really neat. Um, kids, grandkids, just about anything. It's not like any subject is taboo, so you can talk about anything in there. And it depends on where you're sitting and who's around you, as to what you talk about.

As the interviews went on, however, participants revealed that there were certain topics they did not, or would not discuss. Chatman (1992) likewise found that, although retired women turned to friends and neighbours to provide emotional support and practical help for everyday matters, they identified some concerns as inappropriate to communicate with such secondary social ties. For example, disclosing a serious health issue might put a woman at risk of being moved to an institutional living environment. Chatman's respondents kept such serious problems from their secondary ties, turning to their family for information, referral, and support.

Some of our participants expressed similar views, using the term "personal" to identify topics suitable and unsuitable for discussion at the knitting circle.

*Knitter 3:* There's a whole lot of things I wouldn't share in this group. And that's probably another reason why I like the group. Because you can leave any kind of real serious difficulties you might be having, you can leave them at the door and come in here and talk about things like recipes, fashion, men, you know. I'm not here to discuss anything about my private life. If somebody started to open up and talk about that, it could change the nature of the group… I would become uncomfortable if it came to the level where somebody was crying when they were… I'm not at a knitting circle for that kind of in-depth relationship. But as far as support and how's your husband doing, and how are you feeling, that kind of thing I'm interested in. I wouldn't want to go very far down with the knitting group. For me it's not there.

The distinction between suitable and unsuitable topics for discussion might usefully be explained by an examination of the relational issues involved. Tardy (2000) and Coates (2000) use Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor to analyse the ways that women's informal conversation serves as a "backstage" to the "front stage" of everyday life or the workplace. Both authors claim that the front-stage performance of femininity is that of the good wife and mother, "the epitome of niceness" (Coates, 2000, p. 242). They argue that "niceness" prevents women from expressing the range of their true feelings, and that the backstage environments created in conversation with other women allow women to "subvert and challenge norms and explore alternate selves" (Coates, 2000, p. 241). Tardy argued that an informal mother-child drop-in served as front-stage space and that participants did not discuss certain topics: "the topics reported to be taboo are those that would negatively affect the fulfillment of the idealized image of motherhood" (Tardy, 2000, p. 446). Backstage talk such as that done by women friends allows for the discussion of front-stage performances, "describing the feelings that accompanied the performance. During such talk, women will often say things which contradict the polite front maintained during the performance" (Coates, 2000, p. 245).

While some knitters' reluctance to discuss family issues may be an indication that they consider the knitting circle to be front-stage space, backstage talk took place in the knitting circle as well. Backstage talk was more relational than instrumental. One knitter expressed her appreciation at being able, as a woman, to express herself among other women:

> *Knitter 4:* This group this be my lifeline. I can express myself here there's so many different women, of different cultures. Even different backgrounds. Experiences. Um, and some of the women, when they can, they're quiet by nature. I happen to be a rather extroverted person. I have to moderate at times, and I am careful and I have to, I haven't had much patience in the past, with very very quiet women who don't feel they have anything to offer. And I try to do this with my group, my church group. And they're nice women, but they were so programmed. I'd say to them, well how do you feel about [inaudible]? And they were like "um, uh".

Backstage talk also involved knitters' families and the concerns they have for them:

> *Knitter 16:* And my daughter's been away for 20 years now, she went to school and went to [other city] and never lived with us after that. She has her own ways of doing things and . . .
>
> *Knitter 2:* And you can do everything wrong within the first two hours of being there.
>
> *Knitter 3:* My husband has insurance, but he would never let me get insurance. He would never let me talk about it. Even lately I got a letter in the mail [about a living will].
>
> *Knitter 8:* Well, he doesn't want to lose you, [Knitter 3], that's what it is.

Although anecdotes like these do not provide the kind of factual information generally considered in HIB research, we would argue that these exchanges are examples of information practice and that they take social action. In this case the exchanges do relational work through the provision of reinforcement. As Tardy (2000) and Coates (2000) have found, women's informal interactions "not only provided assistance and created relationships but also provided the women with a sense that their experiences were normal" (Tardy, 2000, p. 455). Knitter 2 is providing social information, normalising Knitter 16's experience and anticipating and validating Knitter 16's negative feelings about her daughter. Knitter 8 provides information that normalises the husband's behaviour and reassures Knitter 3 with a plausible explanation that shows him to be a caring person rather than simply someone who has failed to plan ahead. This kind of relational information seeking, and giving without seeking, that normalised, reinforced, and reassured, was common in the knitting group.

> *Knitter 14:* It's amazing, the information that's shared. Some is entertaining, some is personal, and when it's personal it's always, there's always some support, there's more of a concern, it's not intrusive, it's just support.

In this way, HIB in and of itself formed a part of the women's caring for one another.

## Discussion

On one level, it would be possible to reach the constructivist (Talja, 2005) conclusion that our public library-based knitting group is a site rich with information behaviour of various types, an "information ground" (Fisher, 2006). Participants in the knitting circle do indeed engage in the kinds of HIB identified by other researchers, including

active search/seeking (e.g. Wilson, 1997), active scanning/browsing (e.g. Erdelez, 1996), monitoring the context/information encountering/incidental information acquisition (e.g. Savolainen, 1995; Erdelez, 1996; Williamson, 1998), networking and eclecticism (Foster, 2005), and information seeking by proxy (McKenzie, 2003).

Not only do the individual members seek knitting information from one another, they exchange information about health, family, and "anything and everything" else. The knitters relate to each other and compare ideas about dealing with family, the home, aging, and other topics. While many members of the group expressed reluctance about sharing very personal information, the information that they do share is very significant and important, especially for those who use the group to achieve a sense of community.

We argue, however, that taking a collectivist approach to the study of information practices in a naturalistic setting allows us to take the analysis further. By unravelling the knotted contextual strands we have been able to develop an understanding of the many and complex ways in which a discourse community collectively constructs meaning, and the ways that the information practices of that community relate to that construction.

The interaction among the contextual strands was best articulated by Knitter 15, who told us three times that for her the value of the group was "really not about the knitting":

> *Investigator:* So what is it about this group that keeps you coming back?
>
> *Knitter 15:* I think it's really not to do with the knitting. I think, in a way, I find it kind of an interesting group to be in. And I like the social... I mean the knitting is part of it, but I, it's probably less important than the people and socializing.

As this participant was particularly reflective and we spoke to her late in our data collection, we used her interview as an opportunity for member checking, further developing or validating themes that had arisen in interviews with previous respondents (Lincoln, 1985):

> *Investigator:* One of the things we're thinking is ... how it affects the environment, or the sort of ability to share information, to be having something in your hand to work on. And something in common that brings you together. What do you think about that?
>
> *Knitter 15:* Well, my first reaction to it is that obviously, for many people it makes them more comfortable, for then to be able to share, just the act of doing it, you know. But there are perhaps some people, I mean, for me it's hard to talk and knit, I'm not effective – you know... But I think there are some people for who it makes them more comfortable, even just to hold it, not actually to knit on it [...]
>
> *Investigator:* But I'm wondering, I guess, if having a piece of work that you're working on is somehow your excuse to be able to.
>
> *Knitter 15:* Yeah, yeah, I suspect you're right on that, and I wonder if that doesn't, you know women's groups over years, you know, have been, um, something that so they would meet together and share around an activity, and were it not for that activity it wouldn't have.
>
> *Investigator:* The opportunity would have taken place, yeah, yeah.
>
> *Knitter 15:* I think you're right.

*Investigator:* And that's one of the things we're interested in. We both think it's not about the knitting, but in some ways it is about the knitting, because ...

*Knitter 15:* Yes, because we wouldn't be here, except for the knitting. And so it's just like the old quilting bees, you know, those women wouldn't have taken that, or wouldn't have felt they could take that break, and sit and chat and just [inaudible] except that they had this sort of project that they were working on, an immense thing, maybe mending [inaudible] or something else, some other reason to gather.

Knitter 15 touches on the interplay among unpaid work, serious leisure and casual leisure in the knitting circle, and hints at the relationship between these activities, HIB, and the creation of front-stage or backstage places. Responsibility for childcare, housework, and other domestic responsibilities have been identified as constraints on women's participation in leisure activities (Day, 2000, pp. 107-8). Because women's time is often fragmented, many take "snatched" spaces for leisure and enjoyment, rather than planning leisure activities (Green, 1998, p. 262). As this participant has realised, the knitters' group allows for the simultaneous performance of family-based caring work and the experience of leisure with – and receiving care from – other women. We contend that information practices and the complex context are "in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping" (Lincoln, 1985, pp. 36-38), constituted by and constitutive of one another.

## Conclusion

Although our small-scale naturalistic study does not produce broadly generalisable findings, the method does permit a deep engagement with the particularities of an individual setting, and enables the identification of some factors that may be transferable to other settings. This method is therefore particularly well suited to analysis within a collectivist framework, as it allows us to develop an understanding of individuals' perspectives through the interviews and of the collective setting through participant observation.

Although the "information ground" provided a starting point for our study, the concept as it is currently articulated is framed in constructivist assumptions and is therefore limited in its utility for our analysis. "Information ground" data have been collected through a variety of methods including observation, interviews, and surveys (Fisher and Naumer, 2006), but data analysis to date has consisted largely of content analyses of respondents' perspectives on such issues as the kinds of information grounds visited, the kinds of information exchanged in information grounds, the directions in which "information flow" occurs, and the value of the information and the information sources (e.g. relevance, quality, accessibility). Fisher and Naumer have acknowledged these limitations and call for research: "on how information needs are expressed and recognized at information grounds, and how information is socially constructed among different actors .... [R]esearch also needs to address how people's perceptions and participation in information grounds change over time, the life cycles of information grounds (how they are created and sustained; what causes them to disappear or transform), and how they can be used to facilitate information flow" (Fisher and Naumer, 2006, p. 106).

We agree with this assessment, and offer our collectivist analysis which provides a window into the ways that members of a setting collectively construct "information" itself, negotiate and express "information needs" and evaluate the authority of

information sources, and the ways in which information practices and social settings may be mutually constitutive. We argue that the collectivist approach has much to offer HIB researchers looking to deepen their understanding of information practices within specific contexts.

## Note

1. Although these no longer exist at the time of writing, the Ontario provincial government and municipal governments have provided funding for the funerals of people receiving social assistance. See, for example, www.london.ca/ResearchStatistics/links_best_practices/Community_Plan_Revised_January.pdf

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## Appendix. Preliminary interview guide

*Information sharing*

- Why do you attend a knitting circle?
- What is it about the knitting circle at [this branch] that makes you come back?
- What percentage of the conversation would you say revolves around knitting?
- Can you remember an instance where you obtained a recommendation from a member of the group that you would not have known about? Eg. A service/recipe/? Tell me about that instance?

- Did you follow this recommendation? What process did you follow?
- Did you seek advice from anyone prior to following recommendation or that stopped you from following the recommendation?
- Do you ever recommend services to people in the group? OR Can you remember an instance where you shared something with the group?
- What sorts of information do you bring to the group? (charitable contributions, social events, What makes you choose these things to share?
- Is there anything you wouldn't feel comfortable sharing/relating to the group?
- Are there times when you don't feel comfortable knitting? If someone is making an announcement, for instance – will you put your knitting down? What sorts of situations would influence you to stop knitting?

*Contexts*

- How long have you been attending the group?
- How did you hear about the group?
- Have you attended other knitting circles? How does this one differ?
- How often do you come?
- Do you see members of the group outside the knitting circle time?
- Do you use [this branch] library? How? (knitting books, magazines, fiction, programs, research)
- Do you ask the librarians for help? Do you know their names?
- Is there anything about the setting that you feel could be improved/bothers you?
- What is your favourite time of year for knitting? The knitting circle?

*Positioning*

- How do you see yourself compared to other members of the group? With respect to knitting?
- Are you a prolific knitter? How many projects have you completed in the past six months?
- Who do you see as the biggest contributor of knitting expertise in the group?
- Who do you see as the biggest information contributor in the group?
- What is your relationship with the other members of the group?

*New members*: How has attending this knitting circle changed you knitting practice? Knowledge of community? The shape of your week? How you find information about knitting, other things? (Are you more likely to save questions until [the day the knitting circle meets?])

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