Searching for Self: Context, Emotion, and Life-world in Research Practice

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ABSTRACT

A significant corpus of work exists exploring the information seeking practices of research*ers*, including academic scientists (Ellis et al., 1993; Hemminger et al., 2007), social scientists (Ellis, 1993; Meho and Tibbo, 2003), historians (Duff and Johnson, 2002; Rhee, 2011), and humanities scholars more broadly (Buchanan et al., 2005; Given & Wilson, 2015). However, very little work has been done on research-as-information seeking. An activity that can be done by laypeople as well as students and academics, research differentiates itself from other kinds of information seeking in several ways: the information sought is often used to produce outputs, the duration of the activity is often longer (ranging from days to decades) than more casual information seeking, and the methods employed in research are diverse and systematic. This paper introduces the new framework of the Research Self. The Research Self is a holistic and flexible model, with seven interrelated dimensions, designed to deepen our understanding of research practice.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS
information seeking; information literacy; sociology of information

AUTHOR KEYWORDS
conspiracy theories; gender & sexuality; information seeking & behavior; critical information literacy

INTRODUCTION

The novel approach to information seeking presented in this paper, the Research Self, is a flexible and holistic model of the various relationships between identity, emotion, and research practice. An exploratory grounded theory study, this research begins to address the following central research questions: How do certain aspects of self and structure affect the way that research gets done? How does research shape conceptions of the self? This paper seeks to

establish research as a *specific type* of information seeking, shaped by the life-world of the researcher. This work came out of a qualitative grounded theory study, informed by feminist methodology, that looked at the research practices of people seriously researching topics considered by mainstream society to be conspiracy theories.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Through her concept of the "impoverished life-world of outsiders," Elfreda A. Chatman introduced a conceptual framework for how groups and individuals treated as *outsiders* relate to perceived *insiders* when it comes to information seeking (Chatman, 1996). She differentiates insiders and outsiders according to differences in worldview:

> In sharp contrast to an insider's worldview, an outsider lives in a stratified life-world...That is, insiders' lived-experiences are shaped by the fact that they share a common cultural, social, religious etc. perspective. It is these common experiences that provide expected norms of behavior and ways to approach the world.

Insiders, Chatman claims, have access to certain knowledge that outsiders do not. Insiders have a greater degree of knowledge about one another and the privileged information available perhaps only to them by virtue of their shared worldview. An individual's life-world shapes their approach and consumption of information just as much, if not more so, than the availability of said information.

Kulthau's 1991 model of information seeking, the "information search process" (ISP), addresses the role of emotion in information seeking. Each of its six stages has affective, cognitive, and physical features. She emphasizes the power of the affective, arguing that "Affective aspects, such as attitude, stance, and motivation, may influence specificity capability and relevance judgements as much as cognitive aspects..." Figure 2.1 shows each of the six stages, from initiation to presentation, and characteristic feelings, thoughts, actions, and tasks associated with each stage.

Figure 1
The Information Search Process from Kuhlthau (1996)

TABLE 2. Information search process (ISP).

Stages in ISP	Feelings Common to Each Stage	Thoughts Common to Each Stage	Actions Common to Each Stage	Appropriate Task According to Kuhlthau Model
1. Initiation	Uncertainty	General/Vague	Seeking Background Information	Recognize
2. Selection	Optimism			Identify
3. Exploration	Confusion/Frustration/Doubt		Seeking Relevant Information	Investigate
4. Formulation	Clarity	Narrowed/Clearer		Formulate
5. Collection	Sense of Direction/Confidence	Increased Interest	Seeking Relevant or Focused Information	Gather
6. Presentation	Relief/Satisfaction or Disappointment	Clearer or Focused		Complete

Despite the influential nature of Kuhlthau's and Chatman's work to the field of Information Seeking and Behavior, little research has been done on the convergence between contexts, emotions, and life-worlds in the context of research-as-information seeking. This paper begins to explore these interrelations.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the Research Self framework is grounded in symbolic interactionism. Though symbolic interactionism has been criticized for ignoring the structural, this paper fits within its interpretive, humanistic, postmodern turn, as outlined by Denzin, who asserts that symbolic interactionists "...study the micro-power relations that structure the daily performances of race, ethnicity, gender, and class in interactional situations…Interactionists don't believe in asking 'why' questions. They ask, instead, 'how' questions." (Denzin 2007) The Research Self framework looks at *how* an individual's life-world influences and constructs the activity of doing research.

This paper comes out of interviews conducted in 2020 and 2021 with people who considered themselves to be researchers looking into one of three topics that have been labeled as conspiracy theories: the assassination of John F. Kennedy; UFOs, ufology, and Extraterrestrials; and the Missing 411 phenomenon. I interviewed twelve people in two virtual sessions each, transcribing and coding the transcripts using grounded theory line-by-line coding

methods and subsequent thematic analysis. Due to space constraints, I will be referencing a small portion of these interviews in depth this paper (bolded below).

Table 1
Interviewees

Interviewee	Primary Subject	Other info
Steve A.	JFK	screenwriter
Bill S.	JFK	author/ investigative journalist
Cyril W.	JFK	forensic pathologist
Sharon G.	**UFO**	**director of UFO research org**
Harriet S.	**UFO**	**author/experiencer**
Eddie B.	UFO	historian/folklorist/author
Mark R.	UFO	director of CUFOS
Don S.	UFO	author
Felix H.	M411	casual info seeker
Jesse A.	M411	casual info seeker
Jon B.	M411/ UFO	author
Inez M.	**M411/UFO**	**casual researcher**

FINDINGS

Each of the following dimensions of the Research Self is involved with and influences other dimensions as well as the shape of the Research Self overall. The shades of color in the visualization of the Research Self (figure 2) denote the stability or malleability of the different dimensions. Dimensions one (duration), two (depth), and six (epistemology) are stable, in that the facets listed as part of the dimension are fixed and mutually exclusive. Dimensions four (methods) and five (affect and emotion) are somewhat stable in that there are a finite number of possible facets to be included in each dimension (because there are a finite number of methods and a finite number of affects/emotions), but they are not mutually exclusive (as many or as few as needed can be included). Dimensions two and five contain facets that are highly flexible and indeterminate.

Figure 2
 An illustration of the Research Self (with all categories listed—this is not an individual person's portrait).
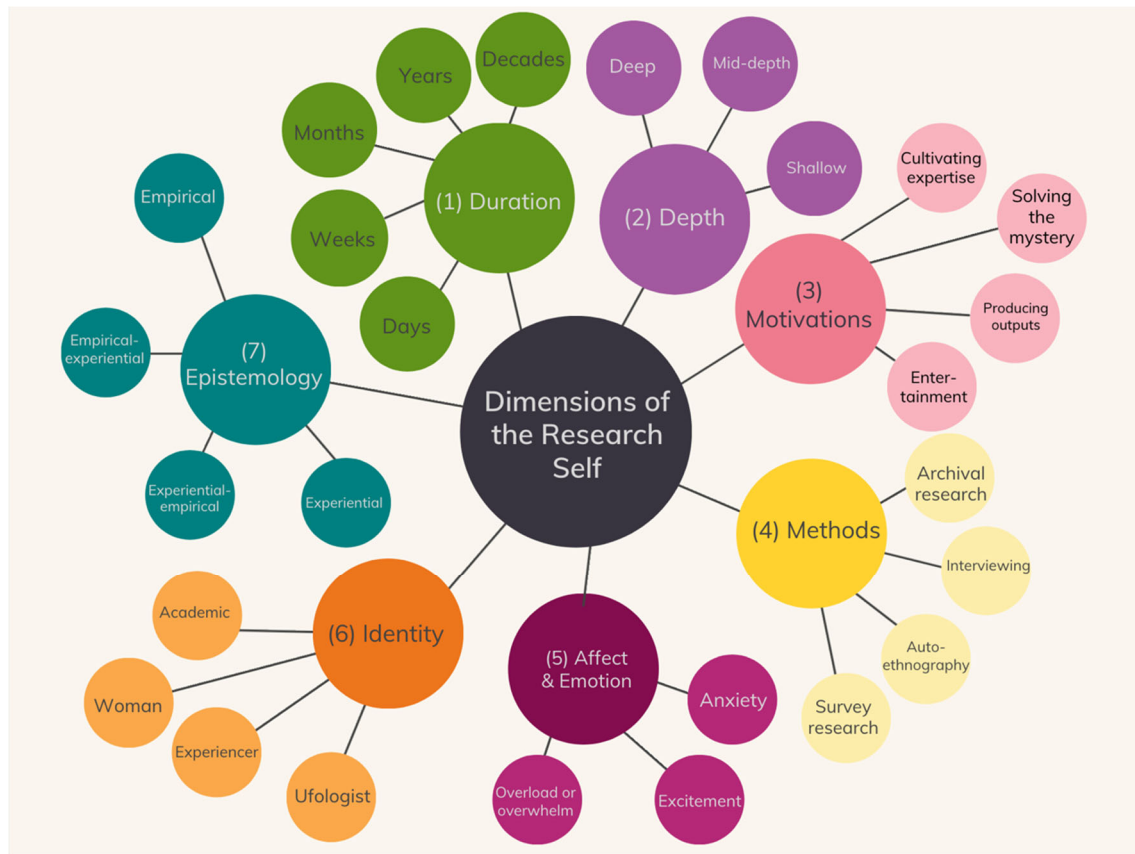
Dimension 1: Duration.

A person's Research Self can change over time, as the individual's orientation to the research topic changes. If an undergraduate writes a term paper about a specific topic and ends up eventually studying that topic in their graduate work, their Research Self will change. Inez described how her relationship to 9/11 conspiracy theories changed: "[9/11] is one of the things I've probably done the most research and reading on…there have been times when I was completely and totally convinced about all of it, like that both buildings had been pre-rigged for controlled demolition. I literally had lost all track of my common sense…" For Inez, being interested in 9/11 theories for an extended period deterred her, ultimately, from the theory. Duration can both strengthen one's ties to a given topic, and, alternatively, weaken them: consider the not untrue, if stereotypical, PhD student's detestation of their dissertation topic by the end of their program.

Dimension 2: Depth.

Years-long engagement with a topic does not necessarily mean that a researcher is deeply engaged with it, and days- or weeks-long engagement with a topic can be deep. However, deep and short-lived engagement with a topic may indicate that an individual has gone down a rabbit hole, especially if methods only or primarily involve close readings of media texts (Marwick & Partin, 2022). Rabbit holes are primarily discussed as an algorithmically shaped snowballing of media consumption (Woolley & Sharif, 2021). I argue that they can also constitute a style of

research, "rabbit hole research," involving a combination of dimensions one *and* two: a fast and deep engagement with, and interpretation of, media texts. Inez discussed another conspiracy theory she became enamored with, more recently: the Titanic/Olympic conspiracy theory.[1] She recounted her growing fascination with the theory, which led her to watching multiple YouTube videos and unearthing historical documents about the theory. She also described growing doubt about whether the theory held any water. By the time she discussed it with me, she had become convinced that it was likely not true. Rabbit hole research should be flagged for information literacy purposes—dimensions two (motivations), four (affect and emotion), and seven (epistemology) and their interrelationships should be noted especially in such cases. "Radicalization" and "pipeline" framings should be avoided, however (Marwick, Clancy, & Furl 2022): deep, fast engagement does not necessarily always cultivate lasting belief, as we can see in Inez's case. Non-conspiracy related research can also involve rabbit holes; all they connote is a deep and fast consumption of information.

Dimension 3: Motivations.

Dimension 3 is one of the most flexible in that it has no fixed categories. Interviewees reported their motivations as variously tied to solving the mystery at hand, speaking truth to power, getting ufology/ UFO studies to be taken seriously by mainstream academia, connecting with others who had had similar experiences with extraterrestrials, helping people find healing after they report having a traumatic close encounter with an extraterrestrial, and entertainment. It also bears recognizing that for some people involved in research around conspiracy theories, fame and money also act as motivating factors (although that can also be said of mainstream academia, to some degree).

Dimension 4: Methods.

Methods—systematic techniques for extracting information from the world—are one of the most obvious aspects of research that differentiates it from more generalized information seeking. Interviewees discussed using a variety of methods in their research, including interviewing, archival research, archaeological digs, autoethnography, and online searches. The Research Self framework illustrates that the methods used for research can be determined by one's motivations (3), the depth of engagement one wants to do (2) or has time for (1), or identity (6) involving something as structural as a lack of adequate math and science education due to class, race, and/or gender.

Dimension 5: Affect & Emotion.

As we saw earlier in this paper, affect and emotion are part of the research process and can function in parallel to the stage of research one is at (Kuhlthau, 1991). Trepidation at the beginning of a research project, excitement during moments of discovery, and satisfaction at the end of a research project largely maps onto the trajectory of most research projects. Many of the conspiracy researchers I spoke with, however, did not consider their research topics to have the

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[1] The theory goes that it was not the Titanic that sank—investors allegedly disguised her sister ship, the Olympic, as the Titanic, and sank it for the insurance money.

boundaries of beginning, middle, and end, as their subjects were enduring mysteries resistant to project-specific containers.

Sharon illustrated the relationship between identity, affect, and research practice as she recounted her experiences interviewing people who have had a close encounter with an extraterrestrial. Recounting feeling a sense of responsibility for her interviewees' stories, Sharon spoke about her motivation to not only accurately record the story of her interviewees, but also disseminate it. She recalled the experience of interviewing through a metaphor of explicitly feminized trauma:

> It's a bit like if you have a best friend and she tells you that she's just been raped…it's a terrible story. You want to be there for them. You're an advocate for them. You want to help them resolve their emotions, you know, all that sort of thing. It's all those feelings that you would feel, you know, I would go...I want to support people. You know, because they've come to me for—they're telling me their story, so I've got to be as supportive and as open as possible.

In this quote, the comparison of an extraterrestrial experience or sighting with sexual violence is indirect; the main metaphor hinges on the *telling*: the confessional disclosure of a traumatic event to someone the traumatized person trusts with the information. Sharon described wanting to care, advocate for, and support people who come to her. This ethic of accountability to and advocacy for her interviewees that is itself foundational to feminist research methods in social science (Wylie 2012). Sharon's research practice thus illustrates the interrelatedness of dimensions 3 (ethic of care), 4 (interviews with experiencers), 5 (affect & emotion), and 6 (her identity as a woman).

Dimension 6: Identity.

Arguably the most influential dimension, identity shapes the life-world of the researcher, and is the most directly related to the structural. A person's identity shapes their life-world, certainly, but the life-world is also shaped according to how social systems and structures treat the individual *because* of that identity.

Harriet was the only participant I spoke with who used autoethnography as a research method. As is the case with autoethnography generally, Harriet's identity is deeply tied up in her autoethnographic work, through her motivations, her epistemic approach, and the emotions she felt during her research. Not only is Harriet an experiencer (meaning that she claims to have had contact with extraterrestrials), but she is also a woman and a non-American. All three of these identities often made her feel as though she is on the outside of mainstream ufological discourse. Employing an autoethnographic approach allows her to use her own identities and experiences—particularly as an experiencer—to speak back to what she perceives as the entrenched ufological power structures of male, institutionalized, empirical, American ufology.

Dimension 7: Epistemology.

Figure 3
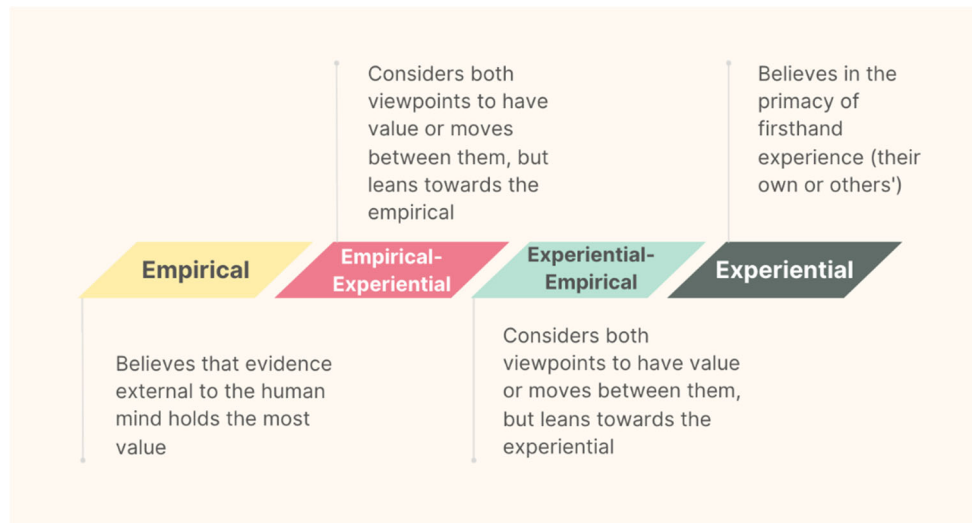*The Dimension 7 (Epistemology) Spectrum*

Figure 3 illustrates the spectrum of epistemolog(ies). Empirical researchers believe that evidence external to the human mind holds the most research value, whereas experiential researchers consider human experience to hold the most research value. While these two extremes may initially seem to map onto positivism and interpretivism, the middle two categories illustrate that this is not always the case. Empirical-experiential and experiential-empirical researchers exist somewhere between the two poles, with the former leaning towards the empirical and the latter leaning towards the experiential.

Sharon's epistemic approach is explicitly experiential-empirical: she reported feeling concerned with the experiences and emotions of her interviewees while also trying to remain objective:

> If you're doing…a face-to-face interview…first of all, I have to withhold my judgment…I'm going to make room in my mind to be able to put what they're saying in there as objectively as I can. And…as we're talking, there's a sense of something growing within, you know, it's like you become, and you're gathering and gathering and gathering…So there's almost a feeling of being an advocate for them. Yeah, that grows within me, I feel a real responsibility for their story.

Here, Sharon illustrates the tension between remaining objective and caring for and advocating for her interviewees, exemplifying the inherent tension in moving between the empirical and the experiential.

CONCLUSION

The Research Self is meant to be used as a holistic way to visualize and understand an individual researcher's outlook and approach, with the interconnectedness of the dimensions illustrating the complexity of research-as-process. As a framework, it works towards cultivating approaches to information literacy and information behavior that are rooted in interrogating the effects of the structural as they play out on the individual level. Further research will apply the model and illustrate how it can be used by information professionals as a way of cultivating

epistemic empathy (Eadon 2020), as a tool for designing information literacy protocols, and by researchers themselves as a practice in reflexivity.

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