

Who is an expert? Expert identity and agentivity in Spanish online health fora

Carolina Figueras¹, Barbara De Cock²

Universitat de Barcelona¹, Université Catholique de Louvain²

The use of online communication platforms for exchanging information and for providing support is rapidly increasing in the medical sector, in spite of parts of society and of the medical profession being rather wary as to this evolution. In this paper, we aim to contribute to this area of research by focusing on the role of the expert in interactive sites designed for patients' interactions. The focus of our investigation is how expertise is constructed and enacted in a corpus of advice exchanges performed in two different Spanish online support forums: one is dedicated to diabetes management, and the other is oriented towards recovery from eating disorders. The fora under scrutiny contain two types of threads: one in which only affected individuals with the illness contribute to the discussion, and the other in which a qualified healthcare professional (a doctor, a nurse, a nutritionist, etc.) actively participates and responds to questions. In our study, we examine how the identity of being an 'expert' is articulated and what differences there are regarding epistemic asymmetry between advisee and advisor when coping with a physical vs a mental illness. We contrast the talk of healthcare professionals as experts with the talk of non-qualified laypersons acting as peer experts, who claim experiential expertise (because they have been living with the illness for quite some time) and, as such, try to legitimize their expertise by providing useful and sound advice to others. First, we compare medical experts with peer experts focusing on the explicit references to the fact of acting as an expert for each category and for each forum (e.g. profession or title), as well as looking into other ways of constructing expert status (e.g. references to experience, use of terminology, claims of knowledge, etc.). Second, we explore the ways in which both groups understand and make sense of the notion of agency regarding the treatment of the illness, namely whether they conceive the healthcare professional, the patient or the illness itself as being an agent in the process of recovery or management of the ailment. To do so, we examine the linguistic material deployed to construe agency in both forums (such as the reference of discourse persons or the type of verbs). Finally, we delve into the strategies put in place in the discourse by and towards the qualified healthcare professionals vs. those in the discourse by and towards the non-qualified laypersons, as well as the

strategies applied by forum users concerning diabetes vs forum users concerning eating disorders. This comparative approach seeks to shed light on whether the expert status of the different groups of participants is discursively constructed in a similar or dissimilar fashion. Likewise, we question whether the agentivity of the patient is articulated and enacted in interaction differently, or not, according to the specifics of the illness and the subject producing the message.