The Pragmatics of Peer Advice in a LiveJournal Community

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Abstract

Soliciting and giving advice has been examined in a variety of contexts, including institutional settings and computer-mediated environments. However, research on the latter has focused predominantly on issues of social support, trust, and credibility and has not looked specifically at the pragmatics of advice. This study employs a pragmatic perspective to investigate patterns and structures of peer advice interactions among members of an online motherhood community on LiveJournal.com. The findings suggest that advice exchange is a common type of social interaction in this online community of peers. Moreover, messages that solicit and provide advice have distinctive structural and pragmatic features.

Introduction

For an increasing number of people, the Internet has become a site for diverse types of social interaction (Estabrook, Witt, & Rainie, 2007; Horrigan & Rainie, 2006). People share information online, get emotional support, pursue leisure interests, and solve problems. One common activity that permeates social interactions on the Internet in one form or another is asking for information or advice. Yet relatively little is known about how advice seeking and giving activities in online environments are structured and performed.

This study focuses on peer advice online, in an attempt to understand how persons who participate in an online community and consider themselves peers solicit and give advice. The study builds on previous examinations of advice in institutional and offline settings, as well as on studies of language and social interaction in online communities. It combines these two areas of inquiry and goes a step further to consider advice in the context of peer interactions in an online non-institutional setting, a motherhood community blog. This context provides an interesting opportunity for advancement of knowledge about online communities and the role advice plays in them, in that 1) it is characterized by loosely defined purposes, topics, and social roles, thereby making various types of interaction possible; 2) it involves participants who are equals in some sense, presumably having the same level of authority and therefore being less constrained by differences in status and power than participants who occupy different positions in social and institutional hierarchies; and 3) it is technologically mediated, which potentially affects the pace, character, and the pragmatics of advice exchange.

This study investigates peer advice interactions in an online community at LiveJournal.com. Livejournal.com (LJ) is a large hosting website with social networking and blogging functionalities that allows users to exchange information and advice, as well as engaging in other types of communication. It is currently owned by the international media company SUP, with offices in San Francisco, CA and Moscow, Russia, and it is multilingual, with users from the
United States, Russia, Japan, and many other countries keeping journals and interacting in their native languages (Herring et al., 2007). LJ describes itself as an online community, a social network, and a place for self-expression (About LiveJournal, 2008). Most LJ interactions take place among peers, who presumably have equal rights to share information, express opinions, and give advice.

Journals on LJ are similar to blogs, that is, they are frequently-updated websites arranged in reverse chronological order (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004; Rettberg, 2008). Authors keep personal journals in which they post entries; others can reply to the entries by posting comments. Social interaction on LJ is also facilitated through user profiles containing biographical and contact information, as well as through community journals and “friending,” i.e., building lists of personal and community journals to visit and read. Community journals can be created, maintained, and moderated by any LJ user. Posting in community journals is organized in threads, and authors’ identities are represented by thumbnail pictures, userpics, and by usernames that link to the authors’ information pages.

The immediate objective of the present study is to gain insight into the pragmatics of peer advice in a LJ community on the topic of motherhood. More broadly, investigations of Livejournal and similar contexts can provide empirical bases for further development of theories of politeness and facework, as well as for the incorporation of other theories into studies of advice exchanges. Analysis of the structures and frequency of advice in an online environment such as LJ can also expand current understanding of the role of advice in social networking and blogging contexts more generally.

Background

Online Communities and Language Use

Over the last few decades, online social interactions have attracted much research attention. Regardless of their underlying assumptions about whether online communities are “real” communities or not, researchers have sought to understand how people interact online, as well as how such interactions fit with offline practices and communications. Sociological, anthropological, and linguistic methods have been adapted to study online populations and communities (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005). The concept of computer-mediated communication (CMC) as communication occurring when people interact with one another by exchanging messages via networked computers has been advanced to differentiate this way of communicating from communication in other modalities (Herring, 2003; McQuail, 2005; Walther, 1996).

Accounts of the language of CMC identify its distinctive features and mention the embeddedness of this type of language in existing social practices and situations (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2004). Language use on the Internet has been described as intermediate between writing and speaking, with a number of distinctive characteristics, such as lack of simultaneous feedback, special rhythms of interaction, mechanisms to compensate for the absence of non-verbal cues, and a certain degree of contrivance (e.g., Crystal, 2006). Herring (2003, 2007) has suggested that computer-mediated discourse can be characterized in terms of two types of influences: the technological affordances of the medium of communication
(medium factors) and the context of communication (situation factors).

Herring (2007) invoked LiveJournal as an illustration of her faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse. She noted that since LJ belongs to the blog genre, its communication can be characterized from a technological perspective as message-by-message transmission that is asynchronous, web-based, and persistent, i.e., messages are archived and remain on the system indefinitely. While relatively easy to describe from a technological perspective, LJ and similar general-purpose community and blogging services are more difficult to characterize from a social, or situational, perspective, in that the wide range of capabilities of such services can support different types of social interactions and entail significant linguistic and pragmatic differences within and across communities. Consequently, all of Herring’s (2007) situation factors of computer-mediated discourse, such as codes, norms, activities, themes, purposes, and structures of participation, can take various forms on LJ.

Among the aspects of language use in computer-mediated discourse that have been examined by researchers in diverse contexts are the pragmatics of naming (Jacobson, 1996), gendered and intercultural aspects of politeness (de Oliveira, 2003; Herring, 1994), the management of disagreements (Baym, 1996), interactional coherence (Herring, 1999), and turn-taking (O’Neill & Martin, 2003; Reyes & Tchounikine, 2004). A limited number of studies have analyzed LiveJournal or similar community-oriented blogging sites as loci of online interactions. Most such studies have focused on LJ as a social networking environment. For example, boyd (2006) explored how the establishment of connections among users, or "friending," affects the development of norms and social behavior on social network sites such as LJ. Paolillo, Mercure, and Wright (2005) employed statistical methods to map clusters of LJ "friends" and their interests. Another study analyzed the frequency of use of languages other than English and the transitions in LJ networks between one language and another (Herring et al., 2007). However, little research has focused on the pragmatics of language use in blogging communities.

**Seeking and Giving Advice**

Advice is a type of speech event that is concerned with providing information, giving recommendations, and proposing a course of action (Advice, 2010). It is a delicate task, especially among peers, because it may impose upon the freedom of an advisee. Advice as a form of social support is often not welcomed by recipients (see Goldsmith, 2004 for an extended review and discussion). Hinkel (1997) warns that the giving of advice is a complex linguistic act that should be performed in accordance with the politeness norms of a particular culture. Thus, in societies that value individual freedom, such as North American societies, advice is often hedged to avoid offending the hearer. Nevertheless, advice is a very frequent type of interaction even among English-speaking peers, including spouses, partners, and friends (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994; Reisman & Shorr, 1980).

The requirement to mitigate advice in order to avoid imposition, critique, or resistance is grounded in the interactional mechanisms of “face work” and politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1982, 2003). “Face” is the positive public image of oneself that is constructed and negotiated in day-to-day interactions. Being able to maintain face means being able to present oneself as a respectable and autonomous actor. Acts that threaten a person’s positive self-image or autonomy, the so-called face threatening acts (FTA), require techniques such as...
indirectness, hedging, and other forms of politeness to take account of the speaker’s and hearer’s faces and maintain smooth social interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

While there have been some studies of how people use mitigating techniques in the context of advice exchanges, these have been limited predominantly to face-to-face interactions in various settings. Several studies have examined the pragmatics of offering advice among non-native speakers of English. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1992), for example, found that international students have difficulties applying politeness strategies when interacting with higher status individuals (university professors) during academic advising sessions. Hinkel (1997) compared levels of directness of advice provided by Chinese and American students and found that even though non-native speakers of English adjusted their strategies according to the status of the advisee, their advice tended to be more direct.

Fewer studies have examined advice in the context of English pragmatics. Hudson (1990) analyzed advice on radio talk shows and identified the following moderating strategies: use of non-subject or “you” subject imperative, pseudo-cleft constructions, the “I would” projection, and conditionals. Goldsmith (2000) proposed a typology of advice sequences derived from observations of advice-giving situations among college students. She found that asking for opinion was perceived as seeking advice, and that overt solicitations of advice minimized the level of face threat in the eyes of advice-givers. In another study from a communicative perspective, Goldsmith (2004) suggested that advice can be a valued form of support, but that the tension between showing support and appearing to impose requires advice seekers and givers to make choices as to the appropriateness of advice, its quality and style, and the sequencing of advice in the course of a conversation. Unsolicited advice has been found to be a common way of communicating relationship rules, i.e., rules about what is appropriate or inappropriate in social interactions (Baxter, Dun, & Sahistein, 2001).

Previous studies of advice in CMC have focused primarily on therapeutic and social support contexts and examined issues of trust, accountability, and credibility (see Locher, 2006 for an extended review). Thus, Impicciatore et al. (1997) assessed the reliability of healthcare information on the Web and found that only a few websites with information and advice on treating common health problems provided complete and accurate information. Another study explored the problems of Internet advice in a consumer-related context (Lynch, Nunes, & Kent, 2004). A survey of 620 respondents asked questions about the use of advice sources (opinion exchange sites and expert advice were preferred) and topics (technology, travel, and health); trust and confidence in human versus automated advice; and preferences for advice speed and ease of use. The findings showed that respondents preferred expert advice in combination with peer advice, although peer advice was considered the most trustworthy.

Locher (2006) examined the content of an online health advice column in an attempt to understand the linguistic realization of expert advice and the mechanisms of facework, or relational work in her terminology. She found that experts employed a variety of strategies in their responses, including hedging, praising, and use of humor. One of the most recent studies of advice in CMC examined politeness strategies in a peer environment of an online self-management program for people with arthritis (Harrison, 2009). The study found that participants employed a variety of advice-giving strategies, including direct advice (imperatives)
and indirect advising statements (declarative statements and mitigated suggestions in the form of questions and stories).

To summarize, previous studies of advice employ a variety of perspectives: communicational, linguistic, and pragmatic. The existing literature covers a variety of contexts, including institutional settings (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992), call-in radio talk shows (Hudson, 1990), and troubles talk conversation (Goldsmith, 2000, 2004). Studies of advice in CMC focus predominantly on issues of social support (Cummings, Sproull, & Kiesler, 2002; Pudlinski, 2005), trust, credibility (Briggs, Burford, De Angeli, & Lynch, 2002), and the linguistic aspects of expert-to-public advice (Locher, 2006). Advice continues to be a challenging and fruitful area of scholarly inquiry. However, no investigations of peer advice in blogging or social network communities have been published thus far. This study contributes to the literature on advice by filling this gap.

**Methodology**

In order to gain insight into the pragmatics of peer advice online, this study addresses three research questions: 1) How frequently do members of an online community solicit and give advice? 2) What strategies are used in soliciting and giving advice? 3) How do participants handle the potential face threats in advice exchanges?

**Data**

The data for this study were collected during August and September 2004 and consist of two months of posts and comments to a public LJ community journal. At the time of preparing this article, there were about 17 million user accounts on LJ, about two million of which were active to some extent (LiveJournal statistics, 2008); the most active age group was people in their twenties.

The community used as a source of data for this study (called community M henceforward) is dedicated to issues of motherhood and childrearing. Created in July 2004, the community consisted of almost 300 members at the time of data collection and was watched—i.e., added to the friends list without membership—by another 100 LJ users. The community invites membership by LJ users who are pregnant or have children; the majority of members and watchers are women in their early 20s from various parts of the United States. Like many other community journals on LJ, this journal provides a friendly space for exchanging stories, asking questions, sharing photos, and getting emotional support. First-time users are encouraged to introduce themselves, and they usually receive a few welcoming comments in reply. At the time of data collection, the community journal had 584 entries with 2,466 comments.

An LJ community about motherhood was chosen for the study of advice exchanges for several reasons. First, LJ supports and promotes community interactions through the features of "friending" and community journals, thereby creating relatively large and stable communities. Second, LJ allows its users to create communities on any subject or interest they may have, and the users can decide how much privacy is appropriate for their community. Thus it provides a good context for studying the relationship between features of an online community and the pragmatics of advice. Third, bearing and raising children are challenging experiences, which are bound to generate uncertainties, concerns, and questions; therefore, it was assumed that such a
community would incorporate seeking and giving advice in its activities.

**Analytical Procedures**

The data analysis was conducted in three steps: After a general assessment of posting activities, advice solicitations were analyzed, followed by analysis of advice giving. Each step is described below.

The general assessment involved the examination of messages for overall structure and posting activity. Descriptive statistics such as numbers of posts with and without advice, numbers of comments, and average frequencies of posting and commenting were calculated.

For the second step, analysis of advice solicitations, the entries were examined qualitatively for patterns in soliciting advice. The following typology of advice solicitations, modified from Goldsmith (2000), was used to guide this analysis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Advice pattern</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Request for advice</td>
<td>Explicit solicitation of advice using the following phrases: a) &quot;I need your advice&quot;; b) &quot;What should I do?&quot;; c) &quot;Should I do X?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Request for opinion or information</td>
<td>Questions like &quot;What do you think?&quot; or &quot;What do you think of X?&quot; that can often generate advice in response, even though they may be ambiguous about whether the asker wants to solve a problem or get emotional support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Problem disclosure</td>
<td>Problem disclosure can also be considered an ambiguous request that can be interpreted as a request for advice, sympathy, solidarity, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Announcement of a plan of action</td>
<td>The recipient may get advice after announcing a plan of action. By describing what action he or she is going to undertake, the recipient invites a comment; therefore, even if the advice in such circumstances can be seen as unsolicited, it is a relevant and meaningful response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Advisor volunteers advice</td>
<td>When an advisor thinks that certain actions are problematic, he or she may suggest avoiding or changing them without being asked.</td>
</tr>
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Table 1. Types of advice solicitation
To address the issue of reliability of differentiating among the categories, a small subsample of entries (about 10% of the sample) was coded twice with an interval of 10 days between coding sessions. The coding generated identical results for both sessions, indicating that the categories from the table presented above could reliably be differentiated by the researcher.

Because Goldsmith’s typology is based on analyses of oral conversation, it was left open to potential modifications in order to represent patterns of advice in asynchronous computer-mediated discourse adequately. The unit of analysis was an instance of advice solicitation. In addition, each entry was examined as a whole in order to identify where within the entry the speech event relevant to advice occurs and what other discursive elements support advice solicitation in this community. The global analysis of entries drew on narrative analysis. Locher (2006) described written advice solicitations addressed to medical experts as problem letters and identified several discursive moves within these letters, such as the question, background information, problem statement, request for advice, and thanking. In the present study, LJ entries were conceptualized as narratives rather than as problem letters, because preliminary analysis indicated that participants emphasized actions and states of the past as part of their advice solicitations.

Narrative can be defined as a set of two or more temporarily-ordered clauses that describe an action or a change of state (Labov, 1972; Norrick, 2000). Labov and Waletzky (1997) identified the following key elements of narratives: orientation – complication– evaluation – resolution – coda. Orientation helps to identify the time, place, persons, and/or the situation itself. Complication describes sequential events, which may be terminated by a resolution. Evaluation reveals the narrator’s attitude and explains why the story was told and what the narrator was getting at. Resolution, or result, is the termination of the events described in the complication section. The coda is an optional closing section that summarizes the story or perhaps gives a moral. The present study drew on Labov and Waletzky’s descriptions of narrative elements and analyzed LJ entries for recurring elements and their structural positions in the entries.

During the third step of the analysis, pieces of advice posted in comments in response to initial entries were examined for their degree of directness. The following categories, based on Hinkel (1997), were used in this analysis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Direct advice</td>
<td>Any comment that included imperatives or the modal verb <em>should</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hedged advice</td>
<td>Any comment that contained explicit hedges, hedging devices, or softeners of various types, e.g., expressions like &quot;I think,&quot; &quot;it seems that,&quot; or questions like &quot;Why don’t you,&quot; &quot;Aren’t you,&quot; or modal verbs other than <em>should</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Indirect advice</td>
<td>Any comment that had no explicit or hedged advice, but had enough information to act on it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Description of personal experience</td>
<td>Any comment that had no explicit, hedged advice, or indirect advice, but had an account of how the person dealt with the situation an advice seeker had described.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Degrees of directness of advice

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The fourth category in Table 2, description of personal experience, was added to Hinkel’s initial set of three categories of advice after preliminary examination of the data. As more and more accounts of personal experience appeared in response to advice solicitations, it became evident that descriptions of personal experience could be considered to be a distinctive strategy of advice that provides information and mitigates suggestions for actions.

Findings

Posting Activity

Community M can be characterized as an active community. Members post messages almost every day, and often more than one message is posted. In August and September 2004, 136 original messages were posted, and most messages received several comments. These numbers appear relatively typical compared to the level of activity of other months in 2004. For example, in the two-month periods of October - November 2004 and January - February 2005, the number of entries was close to or slightly more than 100.

Social interactions in community M consist of sharing emotions, pictures, information, and advice. As the focus of this study is advice, other types of interactions, such as sharing pictures and expressing support, were not quantified or examined. Out of the 136 entries posted August - September 2004, 44 (32%) asked for advice in one form or another. Two other entries did not solicit advice, but still received pieces of advice in comments. In one case of unsolicited advice, a member shared quite sensitive information and was advised not to act on it. In the second case, a member announced the date of a scheduled delivery and was advised to rest and get "all the help you can find."

Overall, 215 comments were posted in response to the 46 messages with explicit or perceived advice solicitations. Of these, 110 comments (51%) provided advice, recommendations, information necessary for further action, or explanations of how to do certain things. Another 43 comments (20%) were replies from the authors of the original entries, who provided additional information or expressed their gratitude. The remaining 62 comments (29%) contained non-advising activities, such as expressing solidarity and support (e.g., "you sound like you have a great relationship ... just what the world needs, more couples like us"), admiration and information about oneself (e.g., "awwies, your son is so cute ... I have a son, his name is Tobias and he is two months old now"), and instances of agreement / disagreement.

At the same time, the number of unique participants who engaged in advice exchanges was relatively small, considering the size and topic of the community. Twenty-five members, comprising about 8% of all members, posted messages that asked for or received advice. Approximately twice as many unique members (54, or about 18%) replied with advice in comments. Most of those who posted original messages also responded to the initiations of others by commenting in the community journal.

Advice Solicitations

Messages with advice solicitations were examined for patterns and overall organization. The frequency of different types of advice solicitations is presented below:

Language@Internet, 7 (2010), article 1. (www.languageatinternet.de, urn:nbn:de: 0009-7-24642, ISSN 1860-2029)
Type of advice solicitation | Frequency
---|---
Request for advice | 18
Request for opinion or information | 44
Problem disclosure | 38
Advisor volunteers advice | 2

| Total occurrences of advice solicitations | 102 |

Table 3. Distribution of advice solicitation types

These frequencies provide initial insight into how members of community M ask for advice. Many messages had more than one solicitation, with an average of about 2.3 instances of advice solicitation per message that contained any advice solicitation. Request for opinion or information was the most common type of advice solicitation, followed by problem disclosure. Announcement of a plan of action was not used as a strategy in the advice exchanges in these data.

The qualitative analysis of messages containing advice solicitations revealed that online peer advice in this LJ community is often solicited in quite an elaborate manner. One entry often contained several questions or requests for advice, and each of them could also be accompanied by other elements. Messages that sought advice often resembled narrations or stories, rather than requests or other short speech acts. In addition to requests for opinion or information, requests for advice, and problem disclosures, the following structural elements were identified as systematically occurring in the data: orientation, justification, and appreciation.

Orientation clauses (cf. Locher’s background information) provide additional information and help to describe the time, place, persons, or the situation itself (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1997). While this additional information may not be necessary for the development of the story, it provides details that make the story more interesting or realistic. Messages in community M that aimed to solicit advice provided abundant information about the authors themselves, their children, and other contextual information. In contrast to background information, the goal of which is to provide information relevant to the issue, orientation information was not always directly relevant to the problem about which advice was being sought.

Even though advice could be solicited and provided easily without the details described in orientations, it appears that members of community M felt compelled or obliged to provide these details. Often this additional information generated emotional reactions and expressions of understanding and support, in addition to advice. The following is an example of how additional information was provided before an author solicited information (structural elements are labeled by tags in angle brackets; spelling and punctuation are as in the source):
i'm going to maine this coming saturday and will be there until the following saturday. my daughter is coming as well... like i could even think about not bringing her. lol. it's a family vacation with josh's side and some of their friends.

it's actually not too buggy there, but i was wondering if there's anything baby-safe for preventing bug bites.

Justification clauses were used to provide reasons for asking advice or information. The reasons for seeking advice provided by community members varied and included being scared or worried (e.g., "I want to protect her as much as I can"), lacking necessary knowledge (e.g., "I was not told much about it by the hospital staff"; "... just wanted to make sure that is correct"), and using peer advice online as the last but not least resort (e.g., "... I guess I have no where else to turn for advise, so i searched pregnancy in interests and this one seemed best").

The third element, appreciation in advance, was also quite common in advice solicitations. When asking for advice or opinion, community members frequently expressed their appreciation for advice to be provided (e.g., "thanks in advance," "i'd appreciate your help").

The frequency and positioning of each structural element in messages varied considerably, which made the identification of a stable structural scheme difficult. Only the "appreciation" element occupied a relatively stable position in advice solicitations: It appeared at the end of solicitations most of the time. Justifications also tended to be positioned at the end, although sometimes they appeared at the beginning or in the middle of a message. Other elements could appear anywhere in solicitations: Advice seekers could start with an orientation, then ask for information, and then disclose the problem. Most frequently, though, problem disclosure would appear either in the first or second position (18 and 14 times, respectively, out of 38 instances). Requests for opinion also tended to appear at the beginning, in the first, second, or third position (10, 16, and 10 times, respectively, out of 44 total instances).

Another characteristic of advice solicitations in community M is that a structural element may appear more than once in the same message. For example, a member could ask several questions, describe several problems, or provide justifications both at the beginning and in the middle. Below is an example of several structural elements in one message; the different elements are color coded:
In terms of number of elements, the shortest entry consisted of one element; there were three messages with one element in the sample. One of them was a request for information, another was a problem disclosure, and the third provided information by announcing a due date without asking for opinion or describing a problem. The largest number of elements in a single message was eight, in an entry with advice solicitations regarding three separate issues.

**Directness of Advice**

As noted above, most advice received by community M members was solicited. In addition, two pieces of advice that were provided as comments to original messages were volunteered by advisors. To a considerable extent, this LJ community journal follows the communicative format of adjacency pairs: Somebody posts a message, thereby initiating a conversation, and other community members respond to the message.

Even though preliminary analysis of this community revealed some initial entries with advice or information addressed to all members of the community, such entries seemed to be infrequent; they did not appear at all in the sample examined. All pieces of advice in the sample were provided in comments. The majority of advice givers provided one piece of advice in their comments; 18 comments contained two pieces of advice; and two comments contained three pieces of advice. Overall, the 110 comments that provided advice contained 132 pieces of advice, or 1.2 pieces of advice per comment.
Members of community M employed all four strategies for providing advice: direct advice, hedged advice, indirect advice, and description of personal experience. The distribution of these four categories is shown in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Directness of advice in comments

Note: \( N_{\text{advice}} = 132 \); data labels indicate frequencies of each type of advice.

As Figure 2 shows, the most popular forms of advice were direct advice and descriptions of personal experience. Community members employed commands or the modal verb *should* 45 times (35.9%). The following examples represent two typical situations where community members used direct advice:

1. Just use water for a gum cleaner right now, there's no need to give her toothpaste or any other type of mouth-freshener.

2. I have three kids, so I'm a self-proclaimed expert. :) Do not leave your baby to cry... the myth that you'll spoil a child by giving them what they need is exactly that, a myth. If your baby has colic, and you're feeling like chucking it our of a window, then by all means put the baby down and take a break for a minute. But otherwise, your baby needs to know that there's nothing that could drive you away, even their crying. Babies cry because its their only form of communication, and they'll cry until you figure out what they need. Take lots of deep breaths, and try chattering. …

Example (1) is a response to a relatively simple question about whether to use toothpaste to brush a baby’s teeth. In situations such as this when a question was rather trivial and had no major implications for a baby’s or a mother’s health, community members tended to provide brief, often one-sentence comments containing direct advice. When the questions were simple and could be addressed with straightforward answers that did not touch upon controversial topics or human emotions, respondents apparently did not feel obliged to mitigate their advice. This type of social interaction was quick, immediate, and informal.
Example (2) illustrates a more complicated response that combines a direct call for particular behavior with a claim to authority, as well as a partial account of personal experience. The topic of this exchange is the so-called "cry it out" approach to handling a fussy infant, a topic that divides many experts, professionals, and parents. Some think that an infant should never be left to cry alone, while others believe that learning how to soothe oneself is an essential skill that all infants must acquire. It appears that the member who provided advice on this sensitive matter felt strongly about it and wanted the advice seeker to behave in a particular way. She presented her information as factual assertions ("baby needs to know...", "babies cry because...") and justified this knowledge by her own personal experience of being a mother of three children. The authoritative position of somebody who has "been there, done that" allows this advice giver to be very direct without appearing overly threatening. In contrast, most advice exchanges that happened in similar sensitive or difficult situations supplemented direct advice with techniques that could be considered mitigations. Thus, community members often used emoticons such as a smiley face, or expressed their support, solidarity, and knowledge from personal experience to frame their direct advice.

As a rather indirect form of advice giving, accounts of personal experience were shared 43 times (32.6%). Below are two typical examples of sharing personal experience:

(3) beautiful becca :) i gave wesley a bath every 2-3 days. but now he is 10 weeks old and i bathe him every night because he loves his bath time so much.

(4) how I got my son to be the great sleeper he is now is, I made him stay awake tell it was a set nap time then I made him stay awake tell it was his bed time.... I started feeding him about 1 table spoon of rice cereal at 4 months mixed with 1 oz of breast milk right before his bath...... (he was breast fed so the DR wanted him to get Iron though cereal) i did NOT put it in his bottles because he didn't get them I fed him with a spoon.... How I did this- I put him in my arms and leaned him back a bit then I would slowly very slowly take a spoon full and (baby spoon) tip it in his mouth he drank it great and then I slowly very slowly started making his cereal thicker. he started sleeping though the night soon after that..... wrapped up or not..... and blanked sleepers helped to.

Similar to direct advice, short and simple accounts of personal experience were often shared in response to seemingly simple and non-problematic situations, especially when the situations are simple yet can have many solutions. Example (3) is a response to this kind of situation. The frequency of bathing depends on many factors, yet it is an unproblematic situation that can accommodate multiple solutions. In such situations sharing personal experience seems to be the preferred strategy. It provides the answer without giving direct orders or spending too much time on the issue.

Example (4) illustrates another typical situation where community members shared personal experience – situations that have no straightforward answer, vary greatly, and require detailed knowledge that only a person who went through similar experience may have. In this example, the advice exchange is about sleep training. This topic has generated a lot of advice from

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pediatricians and other professionals, yet it still seems to be a personal challenge for families. The advice seeker in this exchange looks for advice about how to get her baby to sleep through the night. As there is no magic infant sleeping solution that works for everybody, community members offer their experiences as practices that worked for them and therefore could be tried out by others. This technique was sometimes used along with hedged advice.

Hedged advice was used in 30 instances of advice giving (22.7% of all instances). An example of hedged advice is provided below (hedges are in boldface):

(5) **I think** you need to go in for that glucose test like your Dr. wants you too, chica. You're getting too big, too fast and if your baby's measuring large too, they **may** be concerned about gestational diabetes. I waited for long periods of time with my pregnancies in the waiting rooms too - the key to getting in and out fast is to make the first appointment of the day! And yeah - all that sodium in fast food can make you retain tons of water. If you're going to eat all that salt, make sure you're flushing your system with at LEAST 80oz of water a day!

While personal stories were often related to babies and issues or problems with them, the technique of hedged advice was employed repeatedly in conversations about other topics, such as women’s health or consumer-related issues. Example (5), where the advice giver begins with a hedging device ("I think") and then shifts to a more direct form ("make sure you're flushing your system"), is quite typical for this community. In health and consumer-related matters, members of community M often began by emphasizing that they were providing their opinion or that this might be just one of many possibilities, but later the advice givers would recommend certain actions. Below is another example of such a message:

(6) Ugh, that living situation sounds awful... **maybe** you guys could find a studio apartment while she's little? It'd be crowded, but it sounds like you're already *crowded*... Also - look into a daycare sharing program with other mothers in your community. Sometimes you and another mother can work part time and trade off watching eachother's kids for free!

Indirect advice, or information sufficient for an advice seeker to act upon, was offered 14 times (10.6% of all cases). Mostly, these instances included questions that doubted the advice seeker’s opinion or actions (e.g., "are you sure its the formula that's upsetting her?") or offered a mix of information and questions that encouraged the advice seeker to act, as illustrated in example (7):

(7) Hey there, the symptoms that you listed could be a sign of pregnancy. Everyone is different. I had the following: cramping, like my period is on its way, constipation, tender breasts, i felt more tired than usual. I hope you are pregnant. When you plan on testing?

**Discussion**

Advice exchanges in community M were frequent during the two months of observed activities; one-third of the journal messages contained solicitations of advice, and about half of the
Comments were related to giving advice in one way or another. The high response rate indicates the importance and meaningfulness of sharing advice and information through online interactions for the members of this community. The reciprocity of exchanges in requesting and sharing information and advice strengthens the ties among community members and encourages subsequent use of this type of communication as a way to obtain advice from peers.

Entries and comments related to advice varied in their length, content, and structure. Advice solicitations were often organized as narratives in which requests for advice or information were embedded. Advice giving comments varied from short utterances to quite elaborate constructions. Long elaborations in entries and comments can be attributed, in part, to the effect of the medium. That is, message senders had to operate in an asynchronous environment with multiple potential recipients and compensate for a lack of non-verbal cues. While in a face-to-face situation, conversational work is typically distributed among the participants, who follow each others’ cues as the conversation develops, in an online asynchronous environment each participant must do considerable conversational work on his or her own, due to a lack of immediate feedback and uncertainty about who will contribute next.

Advice interactions in the period studied were often accompanied by sharing of personal information, which could also make messages significantly longer. It seems that sharing personal information served multiple purposes in community M, including community building and maintenance and emotional work. The provision of additional details helped to elicit emotional support from other members of the community and make advice interactions more effective (Feng, 2009). Exchanging personal information is also a way to build a pool of shared knowledge, which is an important factor in social interaction. Drawing on the literature about social relationships, Searcy (2004) uses the concept of mutual knowledge to argue that advice exchanges exist within social networks and that members of social networks use their shared knowledge to manage support and comfort, do facework, and coordinate discursive activities. Extensive personal information could also help to attract more applicable and feasible advice, which has been shown to contribute to the success of advice interactions (MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, & Budarz, 2004).

Advice seekers tended to justify their requests by explaining why they asked for information or advice in the first place. Even though justifications were not as frequent as problem disclosures or requests for advice, the appearance of this structural element in advice solicitations is an interesting phenomenon. Justifications could have been used as a means of preserving one’s face (Goffman, 2003 [1955]) and as a mechanism for maintaining one’s peer status. A demonstration of a need for advice and, consequently, of a lack of knowledge and skills can undermine a person’s position as a capable individual and a peer. Providing reasons for seeking advice, such as looking for the best action or solution, allowed community members to preserve their projected self-image and peer status.

There were also situations in which community members openly claimed ignorance, insufficient knowledge, or helplessness. One possible explanation of this is that the need for solutions in certain situations superseded authors’ concerns about their positive self-image and peer status. Advice solicitation justified by helplessness and frustration can also be used to elicit emotional support, as in the example below:

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(8) i think i'm starting to lose it. i'm so exhausted and sore after being up for less than 3 hours with my daughter. i love her more than life itself, but i feel horrible and i don't know how much longer i can handle all of this properly. … i don't know what to do!!!!!!!! i feel horrible. i'm starting to cry, because i'm so upset.

Coupled with gratitude and sharing of personal information, justifications can also perform a stabilizing function in such non-reciprocal sociolinguistic exchanges as advice. The norm of reciprocity helps to ensure that individuals engage in mutually acceptable or beneficial exchanges and stipulates that people should help those who helped them (Bicchieri, 2006; Gouldner, 1960). In the case of advice, there is no reciprocity because individuals are asked to help without any expectation of returned favor. Justification then can be viewed as an additional motivation to engage in the altruistic act of advice giving. By emphasizing the need for information or the urgency of a situation, those who seek advice demonstrate that they do not merely waste advice givers’ time and effort and that the advice is welcomed and appreciated.

Among the strategies of politeness employed by members of community M, direct advice was common in situations that were straightforward and could have relatively simple solutions, i.e., situations involving minimal face threat. This behavior is consistent with politeness strategies described by Brown and Levinson (1987) and confirmed in later research (Matsumura, 2001). Performing a face-threatening act on-record without redress is usually done in situations of great urgency, in the interest of efficiency, or when the threat to the hearer’s face is minimal. The perceived anonymity of online communication as well as the low barriers to engaging in it could have also contributed to the frequency of direct advice.

In situations that were more sensitive or complex, in contrast, the members of community M employed the strategy of sharing personal experience more often than the strategies of hedged or indirect advice. This finding is consistent with the view of advice as a form of social support that has to deal with the dilemma of being caring and supportive versus butting in and being honest (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997). Through personal example, advice givers established their authority and yet avoided responsibility and shifted the agency of advice, because they did not explicitly tell advice seekers what to do. Having similar experiences of motherhood and sharing them appears to be an important mechanism for reconciling giving instructions and thereby intruding into another’s personal space, on the one hand, and building a supportive and caring environment, on the other.

Harrison and Barlow (2009) came to a similar conclusion in their analysis of advice interactions in an online arthritis workshop: "[T]hrough their narratives, the advice givers reflect on and give structure to their own experience, constructing their identities as expert patients. However, this is achieved without creating a power imbalance: all participants give and receive feedback on their own action plans, and everyone is therefore both an advice giver and an advice recipient" (p. 107). Taking this thought further, online advice interactions among peers may be closer to identity work, sense-making, and community bonding than to obtaining information and instructions for actions. It remains to be studied further to what extent solicitations of advice, particularly in an online environment, represent a need for information or directions for action, as opposed to a need for advice seekers to externalize their thoughts and figure out what to do on their own.
In summary, woven into the fabric of this community, advice takes on a variety of sociolinguistic functions, ranging from establishing rapport and showing sympathy to providing information and warning of consequences. This multifunctional nature of advice in an online peer community provides further evidence that the conceptualization of advice as a face-threatening act needs to be broadened to include other theoretical paradigms sensitive to the content of advice and the evaluation of advice outcomes (MacGeorge et al., 2004) and integrated with emotional support and other conversational work (Feng, 2009). The interactions observed in community M also call for further analysis of the emotional work of advice seekers and the integration of advice seeking activities into an integrative framework of advice pragmatics. Searcy (2004), for example, argues that the theory of problematic integration, which suggests that communicative success depends on participants’ understandings of the prospects of positive outcomes, can be a useful framework to account for both advice givers’ and seekers’ perspectives.

Conclusion

This study examined the frequency of advice interactions and strategies and patterns for soliciting and giving advice in the context of a motherhood community at the LiveJournal.com website. Overall, the findings suggest that a) soliciting and giving advice constitute a considerable portion of social interactions in this LJ community, b) advice solicitations are sometimes elaborate stories that perform a variety of functions, in addition to requesting information or directions for further actions, and c) sharing personal experience is an important form of advice giving.

Many questions, such as the relationship between the directness of advice and types of solicitations, remain unanswered. Future research should examine larger data samples and analyze and compare different online communities in order to produce generalizable understandings about the pragmatics of peer advice in online communities. Possible directions for research into the pragmatics of peer advice online include analysis of different age, class, and gender groups, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comparisons, analysis of the discursive construction of the factuality and importance of advice, and analysis of references to different sources in providing advice. A more specified account of media and technological factors through ethnographic observation—for example, to determine how the members of an LJ community perceive the LJ environment and interact with it—could provide further insight into the role of technology in relation to the pragmatics of online advice.

One limitation of this study is that the assumption that advice is a face-threatening speech act that may impose on the advisee’s autonomy determined the choice of the theoretical framework of politeness and the development of analytical categories for examining the directness of advice. To a certain extent, these choices constrain the analysis and interpretations. It is possible that a more open-ended approach could have provided better tools for an initial examination of peer advice online. From the observations of this study, it seems that online peer advice should be grounded in the broader context of relational and sense-making activities of everyday life.

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