“Me and my guide poodle, Lara, are about to begin our third year at the Hebrew University”: Adults with Visual Impairment and Blindness Position Themselves Interactively in Computer-Mediated Conversations

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Abstract

This study explores the discursive construction of social communication by people with visual impairment and blindness (VIB) who use a Braille display technology in an asynchronous computer-mediated (CM) forum. Two questions guide this study: What topics do the participants focus on? How do the participants position themselves interactively? The researchers analyzed 248 messages produced in 19 threads between June and November 2012 via content and positioning analyses, and computed the density of recurring patterns. The analyses highlight the distinctive daily problems with which forum members cope. Moreover, in contrast to previous interview-based studies which found that negative emotions tend to undermine decision-making, socialization, and coping processes in individuals with VIB, the findings show that the participants co-constructed solutions as they readily, amicably, humorously, and at times optimistically engaged in social interaction and positioned assertive, stigma-free selves vis-à-vis one another and the public.

Introduction

Research has shown that people with visual impairment and blindness (VIB) frequently experience stigma\(^1\) and avoid social interaction (Deshen, 1996; Hess, 2010a; Lifshitz, Hen, & Weisse, 2007). Previous studies that investigated people with VIB utilized interviews, surveys, and focus groups for data elicitation. The present study examined naturally-occurring (Speer, 2007) social interaction among adults with VIB using a Braille display technology in an asynchronous, computer-mediated (CM) forum in order to identify, describe, and interpret what concerns them and how they position\(^2\) or locate themselves in relation both to one another and to significant others in their past stories and future plans. As far as we know, no study exploring the social interaction of people with VIB in computer-mediated communication (CMC) has yet been published.

In the following sections, we present the theoretical framework underlying the study, as well as previous research focusing on the life of adults with VIB. We then describe the methodology of our study, present the findings, and complete the interpretive process\(^3\) in the discussion.

Background

Adults with Loss of Vision

Loss of vision is considered one of the top causes of disability among adults (Berger, 2012). Vision loss limits one’s ability to find employment (Douglas, Corcoran, & Pavey, 2006) and engage in out-of-home activities (Berger, 2012) and sports (Gutiérrez-Santiago, Cancela, Zubiaur & Ayán, 2012). Studies also show that people with VIB often experience stigma and
avoid social interaction (Deshen, 1996; Hess, 2010a, 2010b; Lifshitz, Hen, & Weisse, 2007). In order to facilitate the transition from the safety of their homes to the less familiar out-of-home environment, people with VIB are often provided with orientation and mobility practice (Maguvhe, Dzapasi, & Sabeya, 2012) and a guide dog (Franck, Haneline, & Farrugia, 2011), which enable them to achieve independence and earn a living.

In Israel there are 25,000 people with VIB (Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, 2012). The quality of life of Israeli adults with VIB was investigated in Deshen’s (1996) pioneering ethnographic study. Employing observation, focus groups, and interviews as data collection tools, Deshen studied individuals with VIB as well as their families, employers, and the professionals who supported them. His major conclusion was that stigma and negative emotions undermine decision-making, socialization, and daily coping processes.

Hess (2010b) investigated adult Israeli students with VIB in academic institutions in order to propose ways to improve their quality of life and identify coping strategies that could enhance their independent academic life in urban areas. Using focus groups and personal diaries as data collection tools, Hess found that participants experienced loneliness, stigma, and difficulties in finding employment. The study also showed that participants refrained from using Braille because of their fear of the reaction of sighted people in their environment to the Braille machine and its unique modus operandi. A major finding of the study was that participants who utilized Braille display technology fitted to a laptop, which is inconspicuous to others in their environment, improved their academic writing and reading skills, as well as their level of academic achievement.

Since 2000, CM technology has been mobilized to enhance the lives of adults with VIB, enabling them to use computers to communicate, access information, and produce written and multimedia materials (D’Andrea, 2012). Most of the studies exploring the use of CMC by persons with VIB emphasize its advantages for e-education (D’Andrea, 2012). As regards Israeli adults with VIB, a recent study stresses the contribution of CMC for both e-education and social communication (Hess, 2010b). However, much remains to be learned about how adults with VIB use the Internet for social communication and how effective CMC forums are for providing social support (Gold, Shaw, & Wolffe, 2010).

Self-Construction in Discourse

For the purpose of exploring the self-construction of people with VIB in computer-mediated discourse (CMD), we espouse a functionalist approach to discourse analysis that is based on the assumptions that “language has functions that are external to the linguistic system itself” (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 22) and that discourse analysis is the study of language produced in action (Hanks, 1996). This functionalist approach is combined with narrative analysis and discursive psychology, as will be seen below in the literature review.

The functionalist assumptions mark a transition from a view of language as a closed system to a focus on language as an open system in the context in which it is used (Schiffrin, 1994). Accordingly, we emphasize that discourse in general (Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2006) and various genres of narrative discourse in particular (Ochs, 1994, 1997) constitute “a privileged mode for self-construction” (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p. 15).
Following Riessman (2007), we emphasize that what distinguishes a story from other genres of discourse is “sequence and consequence: [E]vents are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience” (p. 430). Narrative analysts distinguish between big and small stories (Bamberg, 2006). Big stories (Freeman, 2006) are unfolded in interviews and enable narrators to distance themselves from their experience. Small stories are conversationally situated and enable narrators to construct fragments of their experience in naturally-occurring discourse (Georgakopoulou, 2007). The stories analyzed in the present study constitute small stories.

Narrative analysts focusing on big and small stories often distinguish between different genres produced when narrators attempt to make sense of their past experience and explore possible future worlds (Kupferberg & Green, 2005). These genres comprise specific, generic, future, and hypothetical stories (Ochs, 1994, 1997).

A specific personal story focuses on “events which took place at specific unique moments in a unique past time world” (Polanyi, 1989, p. 17). Generic or habitual personal stories constitute a skeletal narrative genre (Ochs, 1997) derived from specific stories when narrators repeatedly verbalize the meaning of related past experiences. These two narrative discourse genres have been defined as realis genres (i.e., the discourse of experience, grammaticalized via present and past tenses; Fleischman, 1990), whereas the discourse of irrealis, or the unreal, comprises hypothetical and future genres (see the overview in Kupferberg & Gilat, 2012). Specific and generic stories are frequently produced in CM troubles talk (Kupferberg & Gilat, 2012).

In addition to using more extended formats of self-displaying narrative genres, narrators use a variety of self-displaying resources such as metaphors and syntactic structures (Kupferberg, 2010a). Personal pronouns, for example, are important discourse guides that indicate who narrators of self-revealing personal stories are speaking as (Malone 1997) (e.g., as an individual ‘I,’ as a collective ‘we,’ as an opposing collective ‘they,’ or as a distanced ‘you’). Following Georgakopoulou (2007), while we do not study these resources as preconceived lists of linguistic devices, we pay attention to the specific functions of these devices in the context in which they are produced (cf. Linell, 1998).

Previous studies show that the use of self-revealing personal stories and language resources in CM troubles communication is particularly important (see overview in Kupferberg & Green, 2005 and Kupferberg & Gilat, 2012), given the absence of body language, facial expressions, and intonation patterns that often contribute to meaning-making processes (Herring, 2010a). The use of language resources enables researchers focusing on naturally-occurring CM communication to identify how interlocutors position or locate themselves in CMD (Kupferberg, 2008; Kupferberg & Gilat, 2012).

**Positioning Analysis: Theoretical Dimensions and Examples**

The concept of positioning is frequently referred to by discursive psychologists. Discursive psychology (Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007) is an approach that espouses the tenets of Conversation Analysis (see the overview in Heritage & Clayman, 2010). Accordingly, it prioritizes the study of self-construction in naturally-occurring discourse by examining how the participants themselves construct the meaning of who they are in actual practices performed in discourse,
while bracketing off a priori explanations or definitions (Edwards & Potter, 2005). From this perspective self-construction is “something that people do which is embedded in some other social activity” (Widdicombe, 1998, p. 191), rather than the construction of self that is based on a priori theories whose validity is enhanced by textual evidence.

Discursive positioning is a central social process that discursive psychologists explore in order to see how “selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 40). Langenhove and Harré (1999) further define a position in conversation as “a metaphorical concept through reference to which a person’s ‘moral’ or personal attributes as a speaker are compendiously collected. One can position himself or be positioned as” (p. 17). By exploring interlocutors’ use of various positioning resources in diverse genres of discourse, the researcher is able to study how self-construction is accomplished (Korobov & Bamberg, 2007).

The definition of ‘position’ presented above raises questions that scholars have dealt with (Korobov & Bamberg, 2007). Do interlocutors position themselves as active agents? Alternatively, are they positioned by others or the context they inhabit? The first question orients the researcher’s interpretation (see Note 3) toward an ethno-methodological perspective that affords interlocutors choice, space, and possibilities, whereas the second obliges the researcher to imprison interlocutors in a Foucauldian discourse in which dominant institutional discursive practices constrain the freedom of lay interlocutors (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

Inspired by Bamberg’s level analysis of positioning (2004, 2006), The Four Level Approach to the study of positioning in troubled CMD was developed and its advantages and limitations described by Kupferberg and colleagues (Kupferberg, 2008, 2010a; Kupferberg & Green, 2005). The approach is based on three tenets. First, it assumes that narrative time is “a back-and-forth movement between the past and the present that furthermore relates to the future, even if it might not always be present” (Brockmeier, 2000, p. 54). Narrative time enables troubled humans to overcome the limitations of chronological time by focusing on the complexities of the troubled past and the possibilities of a better future in the present ongoing conversation (Kupferberg, 2010a; Kupferberg & Green, 2005). In this approach, the researcher is supposed to micro-analyze these temporal worlds in order to construct an interpretive interface. Second, the approach emphasizes the centrality of the present moment—a unique feature of human communication, “the perceptual starting point of time experience” (Evans, 2005, p. 25) and “the locus of ongoing, constantly changing mental life” (Chafe, 1994, p. 36). The present moment constitutes a workshop in which humans interactionally attempt to achieve global coherence, or agreement, on the meaning of their past and future. Third, this approach foregrounds the importance of self-displaying, positioning language resources which indicate where interlocutors’ mental lives are located at a given point.

The temporal worlds are redefined in the Four Level Approach. Level 1 is expressed via language resources that explicitly construct interpersonal communication among participants in the present, ongoing interaction. Level 2 comprises what participants say or write about their life prior to the present when they are engaged in a conversation with other interlocutors. The future level, Level 3, comprises what participants say about their future plans and wishes. The approach also involves the researcher’s construction of meaning at an interpretive fourth level of analysis.
where the micro analysis of the participants’ discourse levels and theoretical macro-levels of analyses are integrated (see Note 3). Table 1 summarizes the level analysis procedure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Analytical Procedure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The researcher identifies and describes language resources used by participants to construct interpersonal communication (e.g., greetings, questions, and emotions and thoughts shared with others).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The researcher identifies and describes language resources used by participants to construct their life prior to the present when they are engaged in a conversation with other interlocutors (e.g., specific and generic stories).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The researcher identifies and describes language resources used by participants to construct their future plans and wishes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The researcher constructs meaning interpretively, integrating the micro analysis of the participants’ discourse levels (i.e., Levels 1-3) with theoretical macro-levels of analysis.</td>
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Table 1. The Four Level Approach

Several studies have used the level analysis described above and shown its contribution. For example, Kupferberg and Ben Peretz (2004) used it to explore troubled CMD of student teachers. At the interpretive fourth level, these researchers summarized participants’ positioning, showing that novice and experienced teachers positioned themselves differently vis-à-vis others at the various discourse levels. Novice teachers, on the one hand, often positioned their helpless and uncertain emerging professional selves in relation to the demanding complexities of teaching (Level 2), as well as to other forum participants (Level 1). Experienced teachers, on the other hand, had to consider which of their already-solved professional problems they wished to retrieve from their autobiographical memory—not because they had to, but for the sake of reflective heuristic deliberations. In their digital ‘translevel journeys,’ novice and experienced participants often co-constructed future worlds of possibility. Novice teachers provided the help-seeking problem presenters with *ad hoc* solutions, whereas the experienced ones provided more systematic rationale-based solutions.

Other studies employing the level analysis (Kupferberg & Gilat, 2012; Kupferberg, Gilat, Dahan, & Doron, 2012, 2013) further show that narrators’ advertent or inadvertent positioning at one level or another is self-revealing. For example, Kupferberg and Gilat (2012) show that troubled narrators of varying ages frequently narrate their problems (Level 2) and develop interpersonal relations (Level 1) when they seek help in a CM mental health forum. However, suicidal narrators participating in the same forum avoid narration (and consequently self-construction) as well as interpersonal communication, and merely invest in the construction of a short-term future (Level 3) when they intend to escape from their problems by committing suicide.

In another study that focused on the life story of a schizophrenic inpatient (Kupferberg et al., 2012, 2013), the level analysis showed when and how the narrator loses and regains her ability to
position herself coherently in discourse. At the level of interpersonal communication (Level 1), the narrator accomplishes the social discursive tasks of constructing different but coherent dimensions of herself in relation to the interviewer. However, when she positions herself in relation to significant others in her tormented past world (Level 2) or attempts to plan future actions (Level 3), she often fails to present coherent dimensions of herself, and at times explicitly wonders who she is.

In light of the paucity of research on the contribution of CMC to the social life of persons with VIB, the present study explores naturally-occurring conversations (cf. Herring, 2010b) that took place in a CM forum among a group of adults with VIB. Two questions guided the study: (1) On which topics did participants with VIB focus? (2) How did participants position themselves in the forum?

Method

Description of Data and Research Ethics

Our data comprise 248 messages produced in 19 threads between June and November 2012 in an asynchronous Hebrew language forum for adults with VIB using a braille display technology. The topic of the forum is guide dogs. Motivated by ethical concerns (Newman & Ratliff, 2001), the authors—a special education expert on VIB and a discourse analyst—requested the participants’ and forum moderator’s permission to explore the forum communication and then bring it to the attention of the public so as to raise public awareness of the needs of people with VIB. Both the participants and the forum moderator responded positively to our request. As one of the forum participants assertively requested, “Please publish this story in all the forums and on all the Facebook pages that exist in the world so that people know that it’s absolutely forbidden for them to ever block traffic islands to anyone, let alone blind people who are assisted by guide dogs.” The authors took all the necessary precautions to protect the participants’ anonymity by changing their names as well as those of their guide dogs and by deleting personal details that might reveal their identities.

The excerpts presented in this article were translated by a professional translator, a native speaker of English. Subsequently, a bilingual reader read the Hebrew and English versions of the examples and evaluated the adequacy of the translated versions. The reader suggested several minor changes, which we accepted.

Data Analyses

Guided by the principle of method triangulation (Janesick, 1994; Kupferberg, 2010b), we conducted two qualitative data analyses—content and positioning analyses—to establish what was on participants’ minds and how they interacted, respectively. The positioning analysis was complemented by descriptive statistics and a Pearson coefficient of correlations. To answer the first research question, the authors performed a data-oriented content analysis to uncover the themes on which the participants focused. To address the second question, a method of positioning analysis based on the The Four Level Approach that was adapted to CMC (Kupferberg, 2008) was applied in order to investigate the characteristic features of the participants’ CM positioning in the interaction. The positioning analysis was used to identify self-displaying positioning language resources, describe their functions, and allocate them to the
three discourse levels of the ongoing interaction with other forum participants, the narrated level of past experience, and a future level.

To this end, the forum posts were divided into three types of level units (Kupferberg & Ben-Peretz, 2004; Kupferberg & Gilat, 2012). Level 1, 2, and 3 units display how participants positioned themselves in relation to one another in the present ongoing interaction (Level 1), when they narrated past experience (Level 2), or when they constructed a future world (Level 3), respectively. These levels are reconstructed by the researchers in the interpretive fourth level. Example 1 illustrates the division of a message posted to the forum into boundary units. Slashes indicate unit boundaries; Level 1 units are underlined; Level 2 units are italicized; and Level 3 units are indicated by the use of capital letters.

Example 1:

Friends,/ Rigi is seven today./ THIS WEEK WE’LL PROBABLY TAKE HER FOR A LONG FREE RUN,/ AND WE’LL SEE WHAT ELSE/ People who see me ask me how old she is/ because she looks old/ Almost every trip I take there’s someone who asks me that too many times./ What do you say about it?/ How did you get through it?/ Sorry about pouring my heart out,/ Enjoy the rest of the day,/ Shirli/

The division into units was performed by the first author and a master’s student acquainted with the approach. Interrater reliability as tested by the percentage of agreement between the raters was 93% for the identification of positioning language resources and their functions in the specific context of the message, and 91% for their allocation to one of the three levels of analysis. Cases of discrepancies were resolved by discussion.

Level 1, 2, and 3 units were mutually exclusive. Level 1 units indicate that the forum participants focused on the maintenance of social relations with other forum participants. In order to account for the message senders’ verbal behavior vis-à-vis the other forum participants, Level 1 units were further divided into the following mutually exclusive subtypes: thoughts, interpersonal communication, information questions, and words replacing visuals. The ‘words replacing visuals’ subtype comprised units used by the VIB participants to describe actions that sighted adults perform automatically, such as opening an ampoule or crossing the road. Level 2 units were further subdivided into specific and generic stories. Level 3 units construct the participants’ future actions or plans, and were not subdivided. We used descriptive statistics to measure the frequencies of the unit types and subtypes identified via the qualitative analysis.

A level unit was operationalized according to its function in the participants’ discourse, rather than its grammatical structure (or its grammaticality). Accordingly, verbless phrases such as ‘Hi everyone’ and ‘congratulations,’ as well as sentences such as ‘It was his birthday three days ago’ and ‘And now he’s three,’ counted as units.

In order to measure the variables, we computed the frequencies of the unit subtypes and types and divided them by the total number of units in the threads. This was a necessary step that enabled us to control for variation in the length of the threads. The results are presented in Table 2 in the quantitative section of the findings below.
Summary of Findings

Qualitative Analyses

The content analysis (Shimoni, 2010) resulted in the identification of themes which were on the participants’ mind as they wrote their messages: the centrality of guide dogs in the life of people with VIB, including their upkeep, training, and emotional attachment; issues related to the use of guide dogs in public facilities such as public toilets and public transportation; the sighted public’s ignorance of the special needs of people with VIB; self-advocacy and the rights of people with VIB; communication with sighted people; and information regarding the daily life of people with VIB. This analysis provided an answer to our first research question: On which topics did participants with VIB focus?

To address the second research question (How did participants position themselves in the forum?) we conducted the level analysis of positioning. The following examples taken from our corpus illustrate the different themes that were identified in the corpus, as well as participants’ positioning at the first three levels of analysis. In Example 2, Esther describes how she bought her guide dog a birthday present.

Example 2:
Hi everyone,
Congratulations to my sweet Rami. It was his birthday three days ago. And now he’s three. I took him to a pet shop and bought him a few toys.
Yours sincerely,
Esther

This example illustrates three themes that were identified at the beginning of this section: the centrality of Rami in the life of Esther, her emotional attachment to him, and to some extent, Rami’s upkeep.

Using Level 1 and Level 2 units, Esther accomplishes two discursive tasks. First, she intensifies her social bond with others via Level 1 units (e.g., Hi everyone; Congratulations to my sweet Rami; Yours sincerely, Esther). This affective envelope (Kupferberg & Ben-Peretz, 2004) was often used by forum members, as we show below.

Using Level 2 units, Esther narrates a small story (cf. Georgakopoulou, 2007): “It was his birthday three days ago… I took him to a pet shop and bought him a few toys.” Esther positions herself vis-à-vis other forum members as a responsible adult who takes good care of her guide dog and at the same time demonstrates her affection for him. In Example 3, Jonathan responds to Esther’s story:

Example 3:
Where, where, where, where, where is the cake?/
Where, where, where, where, where is the cake?/
Jonathan/
Using Level 1 units, Jonathan humorously continues the birthday topic introduced by Esther by typing the words of an Israeli birthday song frequently sung when a child’s birthday cake is served. In this way, he shows that he has grasped the cheerful tone of Esther’s message. In addition, Jonathan further tightens the CM interpersonal bond and communicates his affection for Esther and her dog.

Example 4 further shows the use of humor. A forum member, Anat, welcomes a new member and her dog, Thunder, who have just joined the forum:

Example 4:
Welcome to our ranks! Thunder is a cute name in my opinion. Me and my guide poodle, Lara, are about to begin our third year at the Hebrew University. We’re studying Arabic language and literature. There are several guide dogs like Thunder who are students in all the faculties. Anat

Example 4 shows how participants interactively construct meaning as they position their emotions and thoughts in relation to other members.

However, guide dogs are also associated with sad feelings and thoughts, as is evident in Example 5, where Shirli talks about the fact that her dog is aging:

Example 5:
Sad or happy
Friends, Rigi is seven today. On the one hand, it’s very nice that it’s her birthday. I spoiled her today with lots of treats. This week we’ll probably take her for a long free run, and we’ll see what else… But on the other hand, she’s already getting older… People who see me ask me how old she is because she looks old… They ask me all kinds of annoying questions like “When do you have to give her back?” I don’t want to think about that. It’s not easy for me, but they kind of force me. Almost every trip I take there’s someone who asks me that too many times. What do you say about it? How did you get through it? Sorry about pouring my heart out, but sometimes there are situations of introspection. Enjoy the rest of the day, Shirli

It is evident in Example 5 that Shirli’s guide dog is central in her life, that she is attached to the dog and cares for it. Her narrative also implies that sighted people are insensitive to how much a guide dog means to a person with VIB.

Shirli uses Level 1 units to strengthen the affective envelope that characterizes the corpus messages: “Sad or happy”; “Friends”; “What do you say about it? How did you get through it? Sorry about pouring my heart out, but sometimes there are situations of introspection. Enjoy the rest of the day, Shirli.” Type 1 units are also used to obtain information from other forum participants concerning the problem that was on Shirli’s mind as she wrote the message: “What do you say about it? How did you get through it?”
Level 2 units focus on a specific small story that is not presented in detail: “I spoiled her today with lots of treats.” Other Level 2 units are generic stories recycling the voices of other people who comment on the aging of Shirli’s dog: “People who see me ask me how old she is because she looks old. They ask me all kinds of annoying questions like ‘When do you have to give her back?’” These self-revealing Level 2 units express double voices (Bakhtin, 1981) – i.e., what other people say and what Shirli thinks—and work together with the Level 1 information questions described earlier to emphasize the concerns on Shirli’s mind.

Finally, the narrator also moves the scene to a short future where she will continue the celebration: “This week we’ll probably take her for a long free run, and we’ll see what else.....” Such ‘translevel transition’ was evident in our corpus when participants mentioned additional future activities that were relevant to the individual or the group.

Shirli positions herself at various levels with regard to both the dog she is very attached to and the group of forum participants, whom she expects to be able to understand the complexity of her emotions of fear and love and her ways of coping. Using explicit (e.g., the word sad) and implicit (e.g., generic stories expressing double voices) language resources, the narrator constructs a sad future when she will have to say goodbye to her beloved dog.

The sighted public’s ignorance of the needs of blind people is a theme that is mentioned repeatedly and elaborated on in the forum. This theme is highlighted in Yifat’s story (Example 6):

Example 6:
I want to tell you about a shocking incident that happened to me today. I got off at the bus stop, which is on the road opposite the entrance to my house. As we were about to cross the traffic island, I listened intently, and didn’t hear any cars on either side of the road. I gave Star the command, “Go to the sidewalk,” and just as we began to cross, I suddenly felt Star veer to the right. And then I realized to my huge shock that two vehicles, a motorized buggy and a motor scooter, were completely blocking the island. I understood that Star had realized this beforehand and had veered to the right in order to pass the obstacle, but now we were both in an open area in the middle of the road and we’d lost our sense of direction. Behind us, in the part we’d just crossed, cars were driving along, and we were supposed to cross the other part without the faintest idea where to go. Naturally, when Star realized that I was confused, he also got totally confused because he didn’t know what to do, and of course he waited for a command from me, even though he continued moving forward a bit. Then God knows how, I managed to pull myself together and decide that first of all I had to get to the nearest sidewalk, to make sure that I wouldn’t get hit by the cars that were driving behind me on the same road!!! I gave Star the command, “Go to the sidewalk,” and he did in fact cross and take me to the sidewalk, and even though the step leading up to it was slightly higher than usual, it was a sidewalk that helped me get further away and remain safe from any possible injury. I climbed onto the sidewalk and began to walk in the direction in which my route was supposed to be. And then, to my great relief, I discovered that the fantastic Star had simply brought me to the sidewalk on the other side, where I was really supposed to get to, except that he brought me to another place,
a little to the right, where the step was higher, but that was because of those unfeeling people who don’t have a drop of caution, or a drop of sensitivity for the other, and especially not a drop of common sense!! At that moment, which lasted for an eternity, I felt that I was in immediate mortal danger!!! That fantastic Star saved my life!!! In fact, he saved both our lives!!! We all know that it’s against the law to park a vehicle, whatever vehicle it may be, on a traffic island and block it. Please publish this story in all the forums and on all the Facebook pages that exist in the world so that people know that it’s absolutely forbidden for them to ever block traffic islands to anyone, let alone blind people who are assisted by guide dogs. Yifat

Yifat’s story relates to most of the themes identified in the corpus via content analysis: information regarding the daily life of people with VIB, the centrality of guide dogs in the life of people with VIB, and emotional attachment to one’s dog. It also highlights the use of guide dogs in public, the sighted public’s ignorance of the special needs of people with VIB, the rights of people with VIB, and communication with sighted people. Finally, self-advocacy—referring to people with disabilities taking control of their own lives (Kozminska & Weizman, 2010)—is exemplified in the concluding lines: “Please publish this story in all the forums and on all the Facebook pages that exist in the world… so that people know.” Intermingled in Yifat’s story, these themes express the narrator’s point of view on how her guide dog and her own resources saved her after she got off the bus on one side of a double highway with a traffic island in the middle and had to cross the road in order to reach her house, which was across the highway on the other side.

The detailed narrative mostly comprises Level 2 units depicting the incident wherein the narrator felt that her life was in danger. Level 2 units detail the events that took place, showing how the narrator availed herself of all her senses and coping skills in order to save herself and her guide dog. Example 7 summarizes the core problem-creating sequence of events and Yifat’s solution (cf. Labov, 1972; see also Note 4).

Example 7: The sequence of events
I got off at the bus stop … I listened intently, and didn’t hear any cars on either side of the road. I gave Star the command, “Go to the sidewalk.” … I suddenly felt Star veer to the right. … Behind us, cars were driving along … I gave Star the command, “Go to the sidewalk,” … and he did in fact cross and take me to the sidewalk … I climbed onto the sidewalk and began to walk.

The chain of events is evaluated via self-displaying Level 2 positioning resources by means of which the narrator constructs her explicit and implicit thoughts and emotions when she faced the imminent possibility of being hit by a passing car. In Example 8, emotions are indicated by underlining and thoughts by italics.

Example 8: Positioning language resources

a shocking incident that happened to me today … I realized to my huge shock that... I understood that Star had realized this beforehand and had veered to the right in order to pass the obstacle..., we’d lost our sense of direction... we were supposed to cross the other part without the faintest idea where to go... when Star realized that I was
confused, he also got totally confused because he didn’t know what to do... Then God knows how, I managed to pull myself together and decide that first of all I had to get to the nearest sidewalk, to make sure that I wouldn’t get hit by the cars that were driving behind me on the same road!!! ... to my great relief, I discovered that the fantastic Star had simply brought me to the sidewalk on the other side, where I was really supposed to get to... because of those unfeeling people who don’t have a drop of caution, or a drop of sensitivity for the other, and especially not a drop of common sense!!! At that moment, which lasted for an eternity, I felt that I was in immediate mortal danger!!! That fantastic Star saved my life!!! In fact, he saved both our lives!!! We all know...

Using personal pronouns (Malone, 197) and repetition (Buttny, 1998), the narrator positions herself gratefully in relation to her dog: “And then, to my great relief, I discovered that the fantastic Star had simply brought me to the sidewalk on the other side, where I was really supposed to get to, except that he brought me to another place, a little to the right, where the step was higher.... That fantastic Star saved my life!!! In fact, he saved both our lives!!!”

Yifat also positions herself in relation to the sighted people who carelessly and negligently blocked the road: “but that was because of those unfeeling people who don’t have a drop of caution, or a drop of sensitivity for the other, and especially not a drop of common sense!!! At that moment, which lasted for an eternity, I felt that I was in immediate mortal danger!!!.” In sum, repetition and pronouns enable her to construct a group collective of people with VIB positioned vis-à-vis them, the sighted people.

Example 8 shows that the expression of emotions and the expression of thoughts are intertwined in Yifat’s story. This observation is consistent with Power and Dalgleish’s (1997) model of emotions, which describes and explains how individuals develop basic emotional states such as sadness, happiness, anger, fear, and disgust after an external or internal event is interpreted and appraised. Examined through the lens of this model, the CM story that Yifat communicated to her forum participants after the event took place enabled her to process its meaning cognitively and emotionally by expressing emotions of joy in relation to her dog and anger at the sighted people involved in the experience.

In Example 9, Ron writes about the challenge of opening an ampoule, which due to the loss of sight can be a very complicated task, and requests a solution:

Example 9:

Today I tried to use a Frontline ampoule [a medication for use against fleas and ticks] for the first time. Compared to the structure of the Advantix package [drops for use against fleas and ticks], it isn’t clear to me how it should be opened and how the contents should be extracted from the ampoule. On the face of things, it seems to me that the ampoule is less convenient to use, as if the liquid is inside the plastic packaging of the medication, and not inside a tube with a user-friendly cap. Am I right? Is it possible to use the ampoule without the assistance of a sighted person? I’d be very happy if someone could explain to me how to work with this package. If necessary, we could also talk on the phone. Thanks very much in advance and good night, Best wishes, Ron
Constructing his experience via a Level 2 unit, Ron presents the essence of his problem: “Today I tried to use a Frontline ampoule.” Then, he uses Level 1 units to describe his thoughts regarding the action and to share them with an audience which can understand the meaning of his problem: “Compared to the structure of the Advantix package, it isn’t clear to me how it should be opened and how the contents should be extracted from the ampoule. On the face of things, it seems to me that the ampoule is less convenient to use, as if the liquid is inside the plastic packaging of the medication, and not inside a tube with a user-friendly cap.” Ron concludes these thoughts with two Level 1 information questions: “Am I right? Is it possible to use the ampoule without the assistance of a sighted person?” He also uses several Level 1 units to establish a bond with other forum participants: “I’d be very happy if someone could explain to me how to work with this package. If necessary, we could also talk on the phone. Thanks very much in advance and good night, Best wishes, Ron.”

Ada responds to Ron’s problem in Example 10:

Example 10:

Hi Ron. The ampoules are packed in packages of three and are sealed with aluminum foil at the back and plastic in front. If you peel off the aluminum foil, you can easily take out the ampoule. Hold the ampoule in your hand with its narrow end upwards, and bend the tip until it snaps off. You’ll hear a click when it snaps off, and this opens the ampoule. Invert the ampoule onto the dog’s back, between its shoulders, and pour the substance out. Hope that helps, Ada

In order to help Ron, Ada furnishes explicit Type 1 instructions based on the senses of touch and hearing. Thus Examples 9 and 10 provide valuable information regarding the daily life of people with VIB.

In summary, the qualitative analyses highlighted the topics participants focused on, their emotions, thoughts, and ways of coping, as well as their attempts to improve the quality of life of people with VIB living in Israel. One can interpret the findings as showing that a group self was interactively constructed in the forum (Kupferberg & Asher, 2010; Kupferberg & Ben Peretz, 2004; Kupferberg & Gilat, 2012) which positioned itself affectively vis-à-vis guide dogs and critically vis-à-vis sighted others.

Quantitative Analysis

The qualitative level analysis resulted in the identification and description of Level 1-3 units, as described in the theoretical section and operationalized in the methodological section. A quantitative analysis was then conducted to compare the frequencies of the level units. In addition, we used Pearson correlations to test if there were interrelationships among the unit types and subtypes. Table 2 shows the frequencies and relative frequencies of each level type and subtype.
Level 1 units occurred most frequently in the forum posts \((f=4026, f/T=.72)\), followed by Level 2 units \((f=1304, f/T=.23)\) and Level 3 units \((f=280, f/T=.05)\). Within Level 1 units, thoughts \((f=1882, f/T=.34)\) and interpersonal communication \((f=1688, f/T=.3)\) occurred most frequently among the subtypes. The prevalence of Level 1 units reflects the strong interpersonal orientation of the forum communication.

Interrelationships among the types and subtypes were further examined by Pearson correlations, and the following significant relationships were found: Level 1 units were negatively related to Level 2 units \((r=-.77, p<.01)\), and Level 2 units were negatively related to Level 3 units \((r=-.52, p<.01)\). This tendency is also reflected in negative correlations among the subtypes. Thoughts (Level 1 subtype) were negatively related to the future (Level 3) \((r=-.48, p<0.05)\), and generic past (Level 2 subtype) was negatively related to interpersonal communication (Level 1) \((r=-.51, p<0.05)\). Negative correlations were also found within the subtypes: Thoughts were negatively related to interpersonal communication \((r=-.56, p<0.01)\) and information questions \((r=-.45, p<0.05)\). These results suggest that, by and large, the types and subtypes are independent of one another.

**Discussion**

Our data analyses provided answers to our research questions. The content analysis showed on which topics participants focused interactively in the naturally-occurring forum conversations where they narrated their daily experiences and responded to others. The qualitative and quantitative level analyses further revealed how these participants positioned themselves in the forum. The analyses complement each other, as we show below.
The qualitative and quantitative analyses of positioning showed that participants frequently used Level 1 units to co-construct (Gackenback, 1998) interpersonal communication with other forum members. At this level, they displayed their thoughts and emotions as they discussed the themes identified via content analysis.

At times, the Level 1 multilogue (Kupferberg & Green, 2005) was spiced with humor. This finding requires special attention. Is it possible that humor was used to mitigate the complexities and difficulties of life without vision? We interpret the interactive construction of humor as discursive evidence of resilience in the face of difficulty and complexity, since humor “helps to sustain the psychological immune system by altering how we feel, think and behave. Humor not only helps to relieve distress, it helps sustain resilience” (Sultanoff, 1997, p. 1). This interpretation is supported by a previous study (Kupferberg, Green, & Gilat, 2008) in which the use of humor was identified among adolescents during in a life-threatening national crisis situation in Israel.

Level 2 units enabled the participants to construct the meaning of relevant past experience by means of varying specific and generic stories that they presented in the forum. Finally, Level 3 units showed that the participants occasionally co-constructed a future that included proposals and plans that could improve the conditions of their lives by changing norms and regulations. For example, in the thread following the story narrated by Yifat, the forum participants collaboratively discuss means that can be applied to enhance the safety of people with VIB when they cross the road.

At the fourth level of analysis, we identified, described, and interpreted what was said and how participants interactively co-constructed a multi-functional and safe virtual space where they socialized with other forum participants by sharing their innermost thoughts, expressing their emotions, presenting their problems, co-constructing immediate solutions (e.g., opening an ampoule), and discussing possible future solutions (e.g., raising the awareness of sighted people that it is forbidden to block traffic islands). The study supports the view that social communication constitutes a workshop (Kupferberg & Green, 2005) to which participants bring their past experience for common examination and deliberation in order to crystallize insights that can be applied for the benefit of the participants.

Our examination of the forum from the perspectives of a special education expert on VIB and a discourse analyst enabled us to draw generalizations pertaining to the positioning of the group of people with VIB whose messages were analyzed. First, the group members discussed relevant problems and considered solutions and ways to implement them. In addition, the interaction involved social communication that was conducted most of time with mutual respect, affection, and humor. This finding is particularly important in view of the fact that previous studies focusing on adults with VIB mainly focused on the contribution of CMC to e-education (D’Andrea, 2012). The present study also shows how adults with VIB use the Internet for social communication and underscores how useful CMC forums can be for providing social support (Gold, Shaw, & Wolff, 2010).

Further, the participants positioned themselves as a group vis-à-vis sighted others whose negligent behavior, as expressed in the participants’ voices, ranged from mere inconvenience to
life threatening. Finally, the participants sometimes co-constructed actions that they wished to perform in the future in order to improve the conditions of their lives. This group, which was self co-constructed continually in the corpus, was very assertive in articulating its demands so that the narratives of the past (Level 2), examined under the group discursive lens of the present (Level 1), would bring about a better future (Kupferberg & Green, 2005).

Focusing on naturally-occurring data, the present study reveals characteristics of the social communication of a group of adults with VIB, where self-construction, including the expression of emotions, thoughts, and coping, has no parallel in previous interview-based studies (Hess, 2010a, 2011), which found that Israeli adults with VIB tended to avoid self-exposure (Hess, 2011; Lifshitz, Hen, & Weisse, 2007). Contrary to previous studies showing that people with VIB often avoid social interaction (Deshen, 1996; Hess, 2010a, 2010b; Lifshitz, Hen, & Weisse, 2007), the participants in the present study engaged in lively social interaction.

It seems plausible to assume that our reliance on naturally-occurring data enhanced the identification of these findings. The primacy of naturally-occurring data over other data collected via interviews, questionnaires, and ethnographic field notes has often been foregrounded by conversation analysts focusing mainly on face-to-face recorded interactions (Heritage & Clayman, 2010; Maynard & Heritage, 2005). The present study shows that when the need arises, CM conversations (Herring, 2010b) can enable participants to establish successful, enjoyable, and efficient social communication.

This conclusion raises an important issue inherently related to the well-being of people with VIB. To what extent can the virtual environment provide an alternative space that enhances the quality of life of adults with VIB? Reiter (2008) emphasizes that a necessary condition for a meaningful quality of life for people with special needs involves physical integration into society by leaving the safety of one’s home. Following Reiter’s logic, the virtual and safe place that the forum participants have constructed for themselves may well discourage them from leaving their homes and experiencing life. Furthermore, Reiter and Schalock (2008) observe that since loneliness is the foremost problem of people with special needs, one may doubt the extent to which CM forums provide a solution to this problem for people with VIB.

Translating Reiter and Schalock’s (2008) observation into terms of positioning, we put forward the assumption that the forum participants positioned themselves actively or were effectively positioned by loss of vision and sighted society, and were therefore obliged to opt for virtual space as an alternative. This is an issue that calls for exploration in further studies. In addition, our interpretation is based on the interaction of one group of people. Future studies are needed to investigate the issues defined, described, and interpreted in this study in order to discover the potential and limitations of virtual space versus life outside the safety of the home for people with VIB.

This study has theoretical, methodological, and practical implications. On the theoretical level, it provided empirical evidence that adults with VIB do engage in social interaction when they discuss issues that are relevant to them. In addition, the study supports the usefulness of the *The Four Level Approach* for the study of positioning in CMD. The methodological contributions of the study include the use of a naturally-occurring CM forum rather than interviews and focus
groups. In addition, the use of qualitative and quantitative methods enabled us to read the explicit and implicit meanings that participants wove interactionally and identify what was foremost on their minds. Specifically, the level analysis of positioning identified unique features that were characteristic of the study participants. This supports previous studies that applied the level analysis of positioning and showed that *who the participants are determines how they interact*, as is evident in their choice of one level of position rather than the others (Kupferberg & Gilat, 2012; Kupferberg et al., 2012, 2013).

Finally, from a practical point of view, we believe that people with loss of vision should be encouraged to use the Internet as a site where they can both socialize and find solutions to their problems. The knowledge we have garnered about the daily life of people with VIB and their unique needs should be used to improve their quality of life. This can be accomplished by means of awareness-raising campaigns in the education system and in various institutions, including those that provide public services (e.g., municipalities and transportation companies). The present article constitutes such an action, to the extent that its insights can be applied successfully in order to improve the participants’ daily life.

**Notes**

1. Link and Phelan (2001) define stigma as a power-dependent phenomenon that consists of labeling, stereotyping, cognitive separation, emotional reactions, loss of status, and discrimination.
2. Positioning is often related to voice (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009; Schwandt, 2007). In the present study, we adopt a discourse analytic perspective in order to capture the participants’ voice as it is produced in the forum.
3. Following Lorand (2010), we define interpretation as a conscious cognitive process illuminating the phenomenon in question according to the aims of the study. This process is initiated when the theoretical and methodological frameworks are chosen and completed at the fourth interpretive level.
4. Narrative analysts often use Labov’s (1972) model of the personal story, which consists of an abstract, which summarizes the gist of the story; orientation, which furnishes the background; complicating action, which is the sequence of events that creates a problem or an unexpected situation; evaluation, which expresses the narrator’s attitude; resolution, which reports what happened in the end; and a coda, which shifts the perspective to the present. Narrative evaluation “is the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its raison d’être, why it was told” (Labov, 1972, p. 366).

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