STUDY ON SOURCES OF THEORY IN INFORMATION SEEKING

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ABSTRACT

Many of the studies of individual use of information retrieval systems (e.g., Daniels, 1986) and libraries (Mellon, 1986) assume a psychological (or cognitive) perspective, whether or not they cite a specific theory or theorist. Indeed, much of information seeking research could be said to relate to, if not descend directly from, a single psychologist: Sigmund Freud.

Freud's (1922) "pleasure principle" encapsulates the view that both social and psychological activities stem from a need to reduce emotional tension— a type of "drive reduction." People seek pleasure to alleviate unpleasant internal states—painful feelings or felt desires—and thus reduce tension. Donohew, Nair, and Finn (1984), for example, believe that acquiring information is an automatic human behavior, and typically brings pleasure. Because information seeking implies that people take action in response to some disquieting internal state (e.g., an "anomalous state of knowledge," "uncertainty" or "visceral need"), the pleasure principle could be said to apply universally to information seeking. Indeed, in recent years there has been renewed interest in viewing information behaviors as driven by uncertainty.

Key words: retrieval systems, unpleasant, anomalous, pleasure.

INTRODUCTION

Besides sociology, psychology, and communication, there are other disciplines that either build on those above (e.g., management and business, especially consumer research) or that have closely related theories (e.g., economics and linguistics). In short, there are a number of academic fields that serve as sources of paradigms and theories for the study of information seeking and some of their theories have been actively used in such research.

In the way of theory "native" to the study of information seeking, a recent volume by Fisher, Erdelez, and McKechnie (2005) has allowed information behavior researchers to advance their own theoretical concepts, as well as to identify applicable theories from other fields. Perhaps the most prolific IB researcher in this regard has been the late Elfreda Chatman, whose admirers have written two chapters in the Fisher et al. book devoted to her theorizing: the "theory of information poverty" (Hersberger, 2005), based on Chatman's experiences in studying aging women in a retirement community (Chatman, 1992); and her theory of "life in the round"

(Chatman, 1999; Fulton, 2005a), which explores the influence of social norms and worldviews on information behavior. Both of Chatman's theories suggest researchable propositions that can be tested in field research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Krikelas (1983) merely states the obvious when he says that there is no single theory of information seeking that would make possible easy comparisons among studies. Similarly, Chatman (1996, p. 193) laments that we have no central theory or body of interrelated theories we can view as "middle range."… it would appear we are currently focused on the application of conceptual frameworks rather than on the generation of specific theories.

Until recently many studies of information seeking (and virtually all of those studying information use) made no explicit claims to theory. In the early days of information behavior research most of the investigations were administrative in nature, concerned with collecting data for the purpose of improving operations in information agencies such as libraries. However, there has never been a shortage of applicable theory from various disciplines that might be applied to the search for, and use of, information. In recent years investigators have become much more eclectic in finding and applying theory in information behavior research.

Thirty years ago, Doug Zweizig (1977) observed that theories applied in information seeking studies tended to come from three disciplinary sources: sociology, mass communication, and psychology. Zweizig did not provide examples, but we can still readily identify those first two sources in the work of both Elfreda Chatman and Brenda Dervin. Chatman (1990) invokes Durkheim's sociological grand theory of the division of labor, particularly the concept of alienation as it was articulated by Durkheim and related social theorists. Chatman studied the flow, expression, and use of information among janitors, relating their responses to indicators of alienation such as anomie (i.e., normlessness), powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. She has used various theories in other works; Chatman (1986) used Rogers's (2005) diffusion of innovation theory, stemming from both sociology and communication, to describe the diffusion of job information among workers; and Chatman (1991) employed uses and gratifications theory, also from mass communication, to explore how janitors used the mass media, and other sources, for information and entertainment. Chatman (2000) cites other sociological theorists, such as Erving Goffman, Alfred Schutz, and Harold Garfinkel. For her part, Brenda Dervin cites an even wider array of theoretical influences, not only from sociology, mass communication and psychology, but from the humanities as well. Her work contains many references to a number of her colleagues in departments of communication and information studies, and to theorists Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, Erving Goffman, and Jürgen Habermas.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Some kind of psychological theory is implicit in much of information behavior research. Many of the studies of individual use of information retrieval systems (e.g., Daniels, 1986) and libraries (Mellon, 1986) assume a psychological (or cognitive) perspective, whether or not they cite a specific theory or theorist. Indeed, much of information seeking research could be said to relate to, if not descend directly from, a single psychologist: Sigmund Freud.

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Perhaps because it is common sense that people seek pleasure and avoid pain, Freud is rarely cited in information behavior research. Among those psychologists who are cited at times are Albert Bandura (1977, 1986), Jerome Bruner (1973, 1990), Mark DeMey (1982), Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen (1975), George Kelly (1963), George Miller (1968, 1983a, b), Jean Piaget (1952) and Lev Vygotsky (1978). Some of the work of John Dewey (e.g., How We Think, 1933, and On Experience, 1960) could be counted among the psychologists, even though Dewey is more noted for his contributions to philosophy and education. Similarly, Michel Foucault (1972, 1980) started his career as a psychologist, although many readers think of his work as more concerned with language and culture.

CONCLUSION

It would be nice if theories and their paradigms could be sorted into neat typologies so that we can compare them. Some typologies have been devised, particularly in sociology—see, for example, Burrell and Morgan (1988), Littlejohn (1983), Mullins and Mullins (1973), Ritzer (2000), and Rosengren (1989)—but without much agreement. Where information seeking is concerned, the sheer diversity of theoretical borrowings makes a single, comprehensive comparison impossible. Therefore, the remainder of this chapter describes a selection of paradigms and theories that have been, or could be, applied to the investigation of information behavior.

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