

An argument for the increased use of qualitative research in LIS

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The objective of this paper is to provide insight about the use of qualitative research in library and information science (LIS) literature. This paper also provides an account of the extent to which different qualitative methods have been used or are in use within LIS research. The analysis has led to the conclusion that there is a greater inclination towards some qualitative methods than others. In addition it seems that a majority of the research regardless of method looks at the same research problem repetitively. While more emphasis is currently being given to user studies and information-seeking behavior, the results seem to highlight similar qualitative research methods being used repetitively, but without a useful move toward consistent theory building. It is suggested therefore, that research problems should be redesigned and explored from different perspectives so that new paradigmatic questions can be raised.

Keywords: LIS, qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research has its roots in logical, rational and philosophical analysis. The tradition of qualitative research is as old as philosophy itself. Aristotle, Socrates, Weber, Marx, Durkheim and Giddens are some of the many thinkers who have shaped the philosophical foundations of qualitative research. Though it is often described as an unscientific research approach, it has led to many scientific achievements (Glazier, 1992). In the last century, the emergence of functionalists led to a great deal of criticism of qualitative research, and that has tended to create two distinct schools of thought about the conduct of research: one supporting quantitative research, the other supporting qualitative research.

LIS is an emerging discipline, and therefore still is in the process of building a strong research foundation for itself. Library and information science is becoming increasingly important, simply because of the ever increasing informatization of society. The advent of information technology (IT) has changed the global horizons forever and created an enormous change in the way in which people acquire information and knowledge. Though libraries are changing with these times, there will be tremendous pressure on librarians and information scientists to cater to the needs of people and organizations in a most effective and efficient way. To do that takes a better understanding of many information phenomena not currently well understood, and qualitative research can play an important role in furthering that understanding. Qualitative research is "non-controlling, holistic and case oriented, about processes, open and flexible, diverse in methods, humanistic, inductive and scientific" (Fidel, 1993, p. 219). A review of various qualitative methods would help both researchers and practitioners to develop a broader understanding of the usefulness of these methods in relation to particular research problems.

THE STUDY

For the purpose of this study a review of the literature was done. Articles were chosen from various LIS journals. Qualitative research was limited in LIS until the early 1980s. Until 1985 only 1.6% of LIS researchers employed qualitative methods (Järvelin & Vakkari, 1993). However since the late 1980s the use of qualitative research has been on the increase in LIS research (Fidel, 1993). It also has been noticed that, because of a paradigm shift, that is, from traditional to more alternative methods, greater emphasis on the use of qualitative methods has started to emerge (Dervin & Nilan, 1986). Though qualitative methods are now in increased use within the LIS literature, there is still a strong inclination towards survey and other descriptive methods as compared to predictive and inferential methods (Feehan et al. 1987). In addition there is more emphasis on investigating user needs and user-seeking behavior, but at the same time a lack of research to explore the importance of context in the development of those needs is prevalent.

Even in the domain of user studies, there is an enormous emphasis on quantitative approaches; however, scholars clearly now are urging the use of qualitative research methods (Dervin & Nilan, 1986). With the exception of information retrieval, user studies has been the area containing most of the information science research (Wilson, 1981). Research using content analysis has revealed a thought-provoking shift in LIS research. According to Järvelin & Vakkari (1993) "the most remarkable changes from 1965 to 1985 are the loss of interest in methodology and in that analysis of LIS and the change of interest in information storage and retrieval from classification and indexing [from 22% to 6%] to retrieval [from 4% to 13%]" (p. 129).

The use of some particular research methods can be related to the choice of research problems. Initially LIS researchers

concentrated on systems rather than on the humans using those systems, and therefore, the research methodologies used seemed to be inclined towards more quantitative methods (Tenopir, 2003). Participant observation, case studies and ethnographic strategies were not in wide use in LIS early on. A possible explanation of this lack of use may be that there was for some time a greater emphasis placed on the organizational level rather than on the individual level (Järvelin & Vakkari, 1993).

A majority of studies examined for the purpose of this paper used interviews, questionnaires, and surveys. Some of these which study user and information seeking behavior include: Ellis, Cox & Hall (1993), Fidzani (1998), Watson (1998), Nicholas & Marden (1998), Duff & Johnson (2002), Odongo & Ocholla (2003), Banwell et al. (2004), and Fisher, Durrane & Hinton (2004). LIS literature has lots of studies that address the user or information-seeking behavior either from the individual perspective or from the library perspective, but this strategy does not help at all in building the theoretical framework within LIS.

The examination of studies that have used participant observation (obtrusive, unobtrusive), case studies, and grounded-theory approach as qualitative research methods revealed that these specific methods result in deeper understanding of the issues involved. Some of the studies that have used the above mentioned qualitative methods include: Weech & Goldhor (1982), Barnes (1985), Nyce & Graves (1990), Ellis (1993), Reneker (1993), Bawden & Robinson (1997), Cooper (2004), Druin (2005), and Mahe, Andrys & Charton (2000). These studies have explored not only the information needs or information behaviors, but also explored the intricacies that compose the context of that particular information need or behavior.

Another interesting trend in LIS research is the use of theoretical frameworks borrowed from different disciplines to address various LIS issues. This borrowing has resulted in the desire to explore information needs and information from the human perspective (Thomas & Nyce, 2001). The studies that have used the theoretical frameworks from different disciplines often resulted in the emergence of new dimensions for LIS research. The use of models from cognitive psychology, communication studies, sociology, and anthropology has become an important source for the pursuit of different research agendas in LIS. Case (1991) used the cognitive psychology paradigm in order to explore the conceptual organization and retrieval of text by historians. Chatman (1990) used "alienation theory" from sociology to study the information frameworks of janitors.

DISCUSSION

The problems addressed in LIS research from the user perspective, system perspective, or organizational perspective were rarely stated as questions that could enrich the theoretical base of LIS as a discipline, or that could reduce the borrowing of theoretical frameworks from other disciplines. In other words, the process of theory building was not strong, and the weakness of this process is evident through the tremendous borrowing of various theoretical concepts from other disciplines including psychology, sociology, and anthropology. LIS literature is full of studies in the areas of information needs and user studies, but there are no generally acceptable theoretical guidelines to make sense of this huge collection of data (Brittain, 1982). According to Reneker (1993), "Despite the proliferation of studies, however, we have a very limited understanding of the process that drives information seeking or the variables that influence it" (p. 487). Though there is more emphasis on an information system orientation, there is a growing demand to have more concentration on users themselves. Studies that have advocated this emphasis on users include: Robertson (1977), Paisley (1980), Belkin (1984), Durrance (1984), and Dervin & Nilan (1986).

It may be worthwhile to evaluate the use of qualitative research methods with an objective to enhance the exploration of context. Context exploration may lead to findings that may not only help in theory building, but also can help in developing those research problems that are varied and multidimensional and include different perspectives. According to Thomas & Nyce (2001), "Trading consideration of a universal user for a more multidimensional, human information seeker within the context of everyday activities has proven to be of considerable value to theorists, educators, and practitioners within LIS" (p. 4).

Qualitative research can help tremendously in developing this understanding of context and this understanding in turn can lead to the development of theory. It seems possible that the use of particular research methods is not the reason for weak theory building in LIS, but the nature of questions being explored, that is, the nature of research problems that have been declared to be worthy of exploration have contributed to this lack of theory building. For example, the overuse of surveys and questionnaires has tended to create snapshots of behavior that do not lead to a general theory of information behavior.

The lack of use of participant observation, case study, ethnography, and grounded-theory approach is slowly being corrected, and the increased use of these methods is focusing

attention mainly on user needs and information-seeking behavior. With the help of these methods, the often unexplored issue of context can be addressed and with context the critical issue of why the needs arise. Clearly we need to consider how social context can impact the needs of an individual.

Participant observation, case studies, and ethnographic strategies can lead to an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon. In addition it is vital for the growth of a particular discipline that the research should address the problem not only from various dimensions, but from those dimensions that if explored could contribute to the theoretical and epistemological foundations of that discipline. My argument here may seem to be off track, but the choice of research problem then leads to a choice of research method (Järvelin & Vakkari, 1993). Researchers in LIS have chosen those problems that were limited in scope and thereby created little theoretical cohesion within the LIS discipline. Repetitive emphasis on surveys and questionnaires for user studies, information-seeking behavior, and exploration of individual needs has simply created monotony in the LIS literature that is saturated already with such user studies.

It would not be completely fair to declare that the use of particular methods results in weak theory development. On the contrary, it could be vitally important to raise the question, Are the scholars in LIS asking the right questions? According to Reneker (1993), "Have we been asking the wrong questions, or concentrating on aspects that appear to influence the process or to be important aspects of it but that actually are irrelevant or superficial? Has methodology used in the majority of the previous studies been unsuccessful in allowing us to identify or understand the variables at work, and their interrelationships, which drive information-seeking behavior?" (p. 488). According to Hjørland (2002), "User studies have an air of being proper research, which, however, only seldom corresponds with reality" (p. 430).

Finally it is important to note that research in LIS needs to address not only the objectivist questions but also the subjectivist questions. Unless researchers in LIS address the structural and contextual questions, there will be an inclination towards some specific qualitative methods. But another possible horizon to explore for LIS researchers is the use of qualitative and quantitative methods in the same studies as done by Mokros, Mullins & Saracevic (1995) and some other researchers. Participatory research and interdisciplinary research can also lead to the use of various qualitative methods in a more effective way. LIS needs not only the user studies but also the studies that can build a strong epistemological and ontological foundation. In other words we need a lens, a paradigm, that can be used to see deeply not only into the issues, but also into the causes of issues. This strategy would result in a coherent, vibrant, and visionary LIS discipline.

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