

Type of Contribution: PAPER

Eliciting Examples of Theories in Practice: A Methodological Discussion

Amy VanScoy (University at Buffalo, USA), Tanja Merčun (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia), Africa Hands (University at Buffalo, USA), Maja Kuhar, Katarina Švab (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia)

Keywords: theory/practice gap, research methods, reference and information service, information behaviour, cross-cultural studies

Introduction

The disconnect between theory and practice has been discussed for many applied academic disciplines, including information science (Bawden 2008; Haddow and Klobas 2004). Research in different areas of library and information science has, for example, shown that professional standards of practice do not value theoretical knowledge (Hicks and VanScoy 2019), that papers written by librarians typically do not include theory (e.g., Julien and O'Brien 2014), and that practitioners often view theory as distant from their practical work and of limited relevance to them (e.g., Wakeling et al. 2019). However, there is little research that examines the extent to which specific theoretical concepts and models are being used in practice. Wakeling et al. (2019) suggest that even if librarians do not see theory as relevant to their practical work, they might be using it implicitly to structure their existing knowledge or as a “silent and essential foundation” to practical work. Our research aims to explore this “silent foundation” by identifying which theoretical concepts and models are familiar to and used by librarians in their information service work. During the research design phase of the study, the research team encountered a number of challenges which resulted in interesting methodological discussion. This paper focuses on the challenges faced by our research team in designing a study to explore the theory practice gap.

Previous work

Although there is much discussion of the theory/practice gap in library and information science (e.g., Crowley 2005; Kern 2014), few studies have explored how librarians use formal theory in their practice. Using a survey, Schroeder and Hollister (2014) investigated American librarians' familiarity with and use of critical theory. About two-thirds of the participants stated that they were knowledgeable about critical theory. These participants were to provide an example of how they used critical theory in their work. Participants were also asked about particular theorists and school

of thought. The authors did not discuss whether the participants' examples accurately applied critical theory.

Using interviews, Pinfield et al. (2020) studied whether open access theory was relevant to practice. Among other questions, they asked participants if theory "had informed their understanding of OA" and "how theory and informed their practical work". They did not examine use of any particular theory, and by theory meant "research incorporating theory". Their study included 36 participants from several countries.

Outside of library and information science, there are few examples of studies in this area that use different methodologies from those in LIS. For example, Tsangaridou and O'Sullivan (2003) used observation of lessons, interviews, and discussions of scenarios to study the extent to which education theories guide the practice of physical education teachers. Kwenda, Adendorff, and Mosito (2017) used a guided reflection framework (formal, structured reflection with the aid of a facilitator) during focus groups to study student teachers' use of theory in their teaching. Guided reflection and written narratives of a critical incident were used to study nursing students' use of theory (De Swardt, Du Toit and Botha 2012).

The aims of the broader project

The aim of the overall research project is to explore the extent to which theoretical concepts and models are used in library practice. By analysing and comparing practices of information professionals from United States and Slovenia, it also seeks to get a broader perspective on the use of theories in different environments. As there are many theoretical concepts and models that exist in the field of library and information science, this study will focus on information behaviour theories, models, and concepts used by public librarians in their information service work and address two main questions:

- How familiar are public librarians who provide information services with information behaviour theories, models, and concepts and to what extent do they use them in their practice?
- How does familiarity with and use of information behaviour theories, models, and concepts differ by country?

By examining the questions faced by our research team in designing the study, this paper aims to discuss how to effectively explore librarians' use theory in their practice.

Methodology

In designing the study, the research team encountered a number of challenges. We present a discussion of these challenges and then the resulting research design.

Challenges for the Research Design

One challenge for the study is the abstract nature of theoretical concepts. Participants might have negative feelings toward “theory” or just have difficulty discussing something so abstract. Pinfield et al. (2020) acknowledged this concern. Their solution was to have participants complete a “micro-survey” ahead of the interviews to get them thinking about the topic. We discussed methods to generate interest in the topic and help librarians engage with it. We decided to use a card sorting method with short descriptions of each theory on the card. By physically moving cards, librarians may be better able to engage with the topic. As Conrad and Tucker (2018) argue, “card-sorting exercises strengthen the participant’s ability to externalise their experiences and interact with the concepts represented by the digital or physical cards” (p. 398).

The research team realized that asking about librarians’ knowledge and use of formal theory might make librarians feel that they were being interrogated or evaluated on their knowledge. We discussed how to design a study that would help them feel comfortable and would demonstrate respect for their practice expertise. Similarly, we discussed whether or not it was important that librarians know the names of or provide explanations for theories. This discussion helped us articulate that we were actually interested in the content of the theories and how they are used. Therefore, we decided that each card should feature a short description of its major contribution in plain language. The name of the theory or model and its creator will be on the back of the card in case the participants want to have this information.

Another challenge for designing the study is the cross-cultural aspect to the project. In addition to the need to translate study materials into English and Slovenian, the research team had to take into consideration the differences in professional education. For example, there is less emphasis on specific theories in Slovenian professional education since Slovenian students tend to be younger and may not have work experience on which to scaffold theoretical concepts. This is another incentive to create cards with plain language descriptions, rather than names of theories and theorists.

Our overall project explores how theories and models are used in library practice, but this topic is huge. To create a manageable study, we decided to focus specifically on information behaviour theories, models, and concepts and their application in information services work. Previous studies have already identified lists of important theories in this area (e.g., McKechnie et al. 2005; Pettigrew and McKechnie 2001; VanScoy et al in press; VanScoy, Julien and Harding 2022)

Study Procedures

This study will use a card sort technique and interviews to explore participants' familiarity with and use of information behaviour theories, models, and concepts in their practice. The team will identify 10-20 theories, models, or concepts from lists of those that are most important. The research team will describe the theory in one or two sentences using language accessible to librarians. A panel of four experts in the discipline will review the descriptions for accuracy and make suggestions for revision. The revised descriptions will be printed onto cards for sorting. The card deck will be tested with 4 librarians and revised with their feedback.

Participants working in public libraries who have information service responsibilities will be recruited by using snowball sampling. Members of the research team will meet with participants for about one hour at a location convenient to them or online. The research team will explain the study procedures and then ask participants to sort the cards according to the prompt: "Which of these theories are you familiar with and which are you not familiar with?" After the sort, the researcher will photograph the cards with theories familiar to the participant and then ask them to provide an example of how they used each theory in an interaction with a user. If the participant struggles to find examples, the research will ask, "How might you use this theory in an interaction with a user?" After these questions, the participant will be invited to turn the cards over to see the theory names if they are interested. The interview will be audiorecorded and transcribed. Photographs and interview transcripts will be analyzed to determine which theories librarians are familiar with and use in their practice.

Conclusion

Although there is little research on the use of theories in professional practice, various methods have been used to explore this topic. This study is the first to use a card sorting technique to facilitate participants' engagement with the topic of study. Prior to the LIDA conference, the research team will create the card deck, test it with experts and pilot it with librarians. We will be able to share our experiences with this aspect of the methodology at the conference. We expect to encounter additional challenges as we embark on this research and look forward to sharing them with the LIDA community.

REFERENCES

- Bawden, David. 2008. "Smoother pebbles and the shoulders of giants: The developing foundations of information science." *Journal of Information science*, 34, no. 4: 415-426.
- De Swardt, Hester Cathrina, Heleen S. Du Toit, and Annali Botha. 2012. "Guided reflection as a tool to deal with the theory-practice gap in critical care nursing students." *Health SA Gesondheid* 17, no. 1: 1-9. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hsag.v17i1.591>
- Haddow, Gaby, and Jane E. Klobas. 2004. "Communication of research to practice in library and information science: Closing the gap." *Library & Information Science Research*, 26, no. 1: 29-43.
- Hicks, Deborah, and Amy VanScoy. 2019. "Discourses of expertise in professional competency documents: Reference expertise as performance." *The Library Quarterly*, 89, no. 1: 34-52.
- Julien, Heidi, and Michael O'Brien. 2014. "Information Behaviour Research: Where Have We Been, Where Are We Going?." *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, 38, no. 4: 239-250. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ils.2014.0016>
- Kwenda, Chiwimbiso, Stanley Adendorff, and Cina Mosito. 2017. "Student-teachers' understanding of the role of theory in their practice." *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)* 69: 139-160.
- Marcella, Rita, and Charles Oppenheim. 2020. "Does education in library and information studies in the United Kingdom have a future?" *Education for information* 36, no. 4. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-200370>
- McKechnie, Lynne, Heidi Julien, Shelagh K. Genuis, and Tami Oliphant. "Communicating research findings to library and information science practitioners: a study of ISIC papers from 1996 to 2000." *Information Research* 13, no. 4: 13-4.
- Pinfield, Stephen, Simon Wakeling, David Bawden, and Lyn Robinson. 2020. *Open access in theory and practice: The theory-practice relationship and openness*. Taylor & Francis.
- Schroeder, Robert, and Christopher V. Hollister. 2014. "Librarians' views on critical theories and critical practices." *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian* 33, no. 2: 91-119.
- VanScoy, Amy, Heidi Julien, and Alison Harding. 2022. "'Like Putting Broccoli in a Quiche': Instructors Talk about Incorporating Theory into Reference Courses." *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*. <https://doi.org/10.31378/jelis-2021-0022>
- Wakeling, Simon, Stephen Pinfield, David Bawden, and Lyn Robinson. 2019. "The use of theory in research relating to open access: Practitioner perspectives." *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 56, no. 1: 788-789. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pr2.177>