Social Approach for Interpersonal Information Behavior Research in Academic Contexts

Jongwook Lee, Florida State University
Gary Burnett, Florida State University

Abstract
The authors discuss the relative strengths of using the social approach to examine interpersonal information behavior in academic contexts. Many researchers investigating the information activities of scholars, undergraduates, and graduate students have focused on work-related aspects using information seeking behavior frameworks derived from the cognitive approach. However, the cognitive approach suffers from lack of sufficient explanations about interpersonal sources and often regards people solely as intermediaries whose role is limited to providing referral services. Using the social approach, however, allows researchers to explore both work-related and daily life information activities comprehensively and to understand interpersonal sources in a much broader sense. Future work will investigate interpersonal information behaviors in mentoring using the social approach.
Keywords: Interpersonal Information Behavior; Academic Context; Social Approach; Cognitive Approach
Citation: Lee, J., Burnett, G. (2015). Social Approach for Interpersonal Information Behavior Research in Academic Contexts. In *iConference 2015 Proceedings*.
Copyright: Copyright is held by the authors.
Contact: nadoopro@gmail.com, gburnett@fsu.edu

1   Introduction

The cognitive and the social approaches have often been used to study human information behavior. The cognitive approach focuses on "understanding the way each person thinks and behaves in response to information needs" (Pettigrew, Fidel, & Bruce, 2001, p. 47), and the social approach highlights the influences of social factors on information behavior (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010). In academic contexts, information behavior often entails both work-related and everyday life information behavior (Given, 2002), but many researchers investigating the information activities of scholars, undergraduates, and graduate students have focused only on work-related aspects using information seeking behavior frameworks derived from the cognitive approach, tending to deal with individuals' purposive behavior in finding information to satisfy their academic information needs. The cognitive approach suffers from lack of sufficient explanations about interpersonal sources and often regards people solely as intermediaries whose role limited to providing referral services (Barrett, 2005; Catalano, 2013; George et al., 2006). This paper discusses the relative strengths of using the social approach in comparison with the cognitive approach to examine interpersonal information behavior in academic contexts.

2   Information Behavior in Academic Contexts

2.1   Characteristics of Academic Contexts

Some authors have viewed academic settings as workplace settings (Courtright, 2007; Spink & Cole, 2001), which is common in information behavior research. Given (2002) also regarded academic information seeking as work-related information seeking but discovered some overlaps with everyday life information seeking (ELIS). Given (2002) explored overlaps of information seeking behaviors in academic and everyday life settings, investigating mature undergraduates' everyday life information behaviors in their academic work. In her study, participants tended to actively seek information after acquiring some information passively during their daily lives. Furthermore, the participants sometimes sought academic information to address everyday concerns, and their daily experiences also influenced their academic work. While Given (2002) did not clearly differentiate academic settings from work settings, Branch (2003) treated them as separate by comparing the information seeking behaviors of nontraditional undergraduates ("taking one or two courses a semester toward their degree and were full-time employees of New York State Education Department (NYSED)") at home, work, and school. The study showed that the skills and knowledge the participants acquired from an information literacy course were "transferred to work and home information seeking" (p.13). Branch's work, thus supports such interrelationships between information behaviors in work, everyday life, and academic settings.

2.2   Information Behavior Research in Academic Contexts

A majority of information behavior research conducted in academic contexts has focused on "information seeking" behavior of targeted populations. Although such studies acknowledged the influential roles of people, including faculty members and colleagues, as information sources (Barrett, 2005; Catalano, 2013; George et al., 2006), that role was typically limited to intermediaries who simply assisted individuals' information seeking behaviors. For example, Meho and Tibbo (2003) noted that social science faculty members studying stateless nations frequently consult with interpersonal sources such as friends or colleagues in the information seeking process. Barrett (2005) examined the information seeking behavior of humanities graduate students in order to improve library services and found that respondents consult with other people to find written materials. In addition, George et al. (2006) reported the significant influence of people on information seeking of graduate students. As a result, many previous information behavior studies in academic contexts have tended to draw similar conclusions or implications, highlighting the necessity of increasing individuals' information literacy skills.

3   Interpersonal Information Behavior Research

In workplace and everyday life contexts, many scholars have perceived the role of interpersonal sources as information providers (for example, Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010; Julien & Michels, 2000; Xu, Tan, & Yang, 2006). For example, in everyday life settings, Julien and Michels (2000) found that overall, more than 40% of respondents considered human sources as the most ideal in both work-related and personal situations. Agosto and Hughes-Hassell (2005) examined the everyday life information seeking of urban young adults. Their participants considered people as their main source of information. On the one hand, in organizational settings, some scholars like Xu, Tan, and Yang (2006) and Miller and Jablin (1991) viewed people as an information provider. For instance, Xu et al. (2006) proposed a model of interpersonal seeking behavior, and Miller and Jablin (1991) examined the newcomers' information seeking behaviors from other employees in an organization. In addition, several studies that investigated information behavior in mentoring have relied on an assumption that people are a direct source of information (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993).

4   Discussion

Cognitive frameworks of information seeking behavior can explain individuals' purposeful information behavior, but they have weaknesses when explaining other types of information behaviors, such as everyday life information behavior, serendipitous information discovery, or information avoidance. On the other hand, a framework based on the social approach can explain both work-related and everyday life information behaviors, which is supported by the study of Huotari and Chatman (2001), showing the applicability of contextual frameworks associated with the concept of ELIS to study work-related information behavior. While the social approach might not fully explain purposive information behavior, it is beneficial to explore both work-related and daily life information activities comprehensively.

Moreover, as stated above, unlike information behavior research in academic contexts, many studies in other contexts have presented the role of interpersonal sources not just as intermediaries, but as information providers. Such works are typically based on contextual frameworks derived from the social approach. Pettigrew, Fidel, and Bruce (2001) support this argument, suggesting that scholars examining the social aspects of information behavior seek to figure out "the impact of interpersonal relationships and dynamics on information flow and on how information sharing is a part of human communication" (p. 59).

5   Conclusion and Future Work

Using social frameworks, such as ELIS, small world, information worlds, information grounds, or information practices, may be beneficial for exploring interpersonal information behaviors, as they typically assume that information behavior takes place in social interaction and that people can themselves be information providers rather than simply acting as intermediaries. This may contribute to expanding the scope of information behavior research and the role of interpersonal source in academic contexts.

Future work will investigate interpersonal information behaviors in academic mentoring using the social approach, as very few library and information science researchers studied information behavior aspects in mentoring while several management researchers (for example, Mullen, 1994; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993) covered them. Mentoring as a context for research enables the researchers to rely on the social approach, as it is a type of social interaction between more than two individuals. The study will

explore types of information exchanged in mentoring between faculty advisors and their doctoral students based on a socialization content framework developed in organizational settings. The content framework to be developed from the study can be used as a measure for doctoral students' socialization outcomes and can deepen understanding of their mentoring and socialization experiences.

6   References

Agosto, D. E., & Hughes-Hassell, S. (2005). People, places, and questions: An investigation of the everyday life information-seeking behaviors of urban young adults. *Library & Information Science Research, 27*, 141-163.

Barrett, A. (2005). The information-seeking habits of graduate student researchers in the humanities. *Journal of Academic Librarianship, 31*(4), 324-331.

Branch, J. L. (2003). Nontraditional undergraduates at home, work, and school: an examination of information-seeking behaviors and the impact of information literacy instruction. *Research Strategies, 19*, 3-15.

Catalano, A. (2013). Patterns of graduate students' information seeking behavior: a meta-synthesis of the literature. *Journal of Documentation, 69*(2), 243-274.

Courtright, C. (2007). Context in information behavior research. *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology, 41*(1), 273-306. doi: 10.1002/aris.2007.1440410113

George, C., Brigh, A., Hurlbert, T., Linke, E. C., St. Clair, G., & Stein, J. (2006). Scholarly use of information: graduate students' information seeking behavior. *Information Research, 11*(4) paper 272. Available at http://InformationR.net/ir/11-4/paper272.html

Given, L. M. (2002). The academic and the everyday: Investigating the overlap in mature undergraduates' information-seeking behaviors. *Library & Information Science Research, 24*, 17-29.

Huotari, M.-L., & Chatman, E. (2001). Using everyday life information seeking to explain organizational behavior. *Library & Information Science Research, 23*, 351-366.

Jaeger, P. T., & Burnett, G. (2010). *Information worlds: Social context, technology, and information behavior in the age of the Internet*. London: Routledge.

Julien, H. & Michels, D. (2000). Source selection among information seekers: Ideals and realities. *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science, 25*(1), 1-18.

Meho, L. I., & Tibbo, H. R. (2003). Modeling the information-seeking behavior of social scientists: Ellis's study revisited. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 54*(6), 570-587.

Miller, V. D., & Jablin, F. M. (1991). Information seeking during organizational entry: Influences, tactics, and a model of the process. *Academy of Management Review, 16*(1), 92-120.

Mullen, E. (1994). Framing the mentoring relationship as an information exchange. *Human Resource Management Review, 4*(3), 257-281.

Ostroff, C., & Kozlowski, S. W. J. (1993). The role of mentoring in the information gathering processes of newcomers during early organizational socialization. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 42*, 170-183.

Pettigrew, K. E., Fidel, R., & Bruce, H. (2001). Conceptual Frameworks in Information Behavior. *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology, 35*, 43-78.

Spink, A., & Cole, C. (2001). Introduction to the special issue: Everyday life information-seeking research. *Library & Information Science Research, 23*, 301-304.

Xu, Y., Tan, B. C. Y., & Yang, L. (2006). Who will you ask? An empirical study of interpersonal task information seeking. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 57,* 1666-1677.