

Methods, Practice, Theory: Researching Human Information Behavior in the Context of Migration

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Abstract

This session uses a roundtable format to bring together researchers working on human information behavior (HIB) and non dominant groups. As a session, we focus on the study of transnational migration, with the understanding that many of the issues faced by researchers in this area are shared by projects on other non-dominant groups. Our objective is to foster conversation among a community of active researchers on the theoretical, methodological, professional and political aspects of migration. The term migration is here considered broadly, so as to include not only movement between countries, but also movement between the urban and rural, permanently or temporarily, once or repeatedly. Rather than discussing individual research projects in depth, we will share methodological challenges of studying migration; relevant interdisciplinary theory or theories that provide insight into migrational experience in the context of information practices; and extensions of research to professional work of information institutions. Our key objective is to provide a space that brings together a community of researchers who share similar interests in (and face similar challenges with) qualitative research with non-dominant groups.

Keywords: immigration, methodology, theory, qualitative research

Introduction

In this session, we will explore key methodological, practical and theoretical issues in information behavior research related to migration, bringing together themes shared by research to date and pointing to possibilities for future scholarship. Although our focus is on HIB research related to migration, themes and concepts developed in this discussion bear relevance to scholarship in other areas of information science, including work on marginalized groups and subcultures, and outreach programming at public libraries. We have three key conceptual foci: theory, methods and practice.

Theory

Our session works towards gathering research in this area into a more cohesive collection of existing LIS research on migration, as well as making connections to outside theory. At the same time, we question the extent to which it is useful to try and build a cohesive body of scholarship around migration. Are migratory experiences so heterogeneous as to defy cohesion, at least on some level? In the midst of fuzzy conceptions of different, yet often profoundly distinct, populations, can findings from studies on migrant workers and international students be applied to refugees or immigrants? What about differences between domestic minorities and those who have experienced migration? On a disciplinary level, we also probe the tendency to draw on theory from other disciplines (including sociology, immigration studies,

urban studies, science and technology studies, cultural studies, economics) rather than building theory from our own discipline. In doing so, we encourage LIS researchers not just to poach but to produce theory.

Methods

To explore fully the contexts of information behavior and identify relevant variables that shape it, qualitative, exploratory studies are needed. This panel focuses on the range of qualitative and interpretive methods for studying migration, drawing on research experience to discuss affordances and limitations of different methodological decisions. Although we focus on methods that have been used for research on migration, these methods lend themselves to qualitative work in a wide array of areas.

Practice

Though information behavior research in the context of migration is important to the work of information professionals, there are many unexplored areas and topics that need to be resolved for future studies to be able to provide more concrete findings to practitioners. These include: a consideration of the local policy context of migration; an understanding of the context within which individuals are migrating; and an exploration of the types of challenges individuals face during or after migration. By understanding the types of challenges and barriers individuals face during and following migration, research will be able to show which barriers exist and can be solved at the individual level, and which are systemic issues that require resources offered at a broader scale, such as public education campaigns.

Contributions

Current migration-focused research in information studies is scattered and fragmented, and there is furthermore a lack of dialog across disciplines. Some concepts, for instance information gatekeepers (see Barzilai-Nahon, 2009), haven't gained traction among others studying immigrant information behavior. At the same time, although quantitative, survey-based studies of immigration are plentiful, there are few empirical studies explicitly of immigrant information behavior; of those that exist, some are large-scale, descriptive and survey-based (i.e. Mehra & Papajohn, 2007) which neglect many of the micro level factors – language, country of origin, immigration class, family status, social context – that can greatly shape information behavior; others focus on institutions such as libraries and other organizations and their role in immigrant adaptation without fully exploring immigrant behavior independent of these programs or facilities (e.g. Burke, 2008). While there is a large LIS practitioner-based literature, these articles are typically brief descriptions of library programs for immigrants; although helpful in understanding the successes of specific libraries in serving certain populations, these texts do not provide nuanced analysis of immigrant information behavior. By bringing together scholars with different areas of expertise on migrational information behavior, different methodological approaches and different theoretical frameworks, this session will spark dialogue not only in terms of theory, but also in terms of methodology and professional practice.

Format

Instead of a traditional panel where participants present individual work, organizers will briefly introduce themselves and their research. They will then focus in turn on theory, methods and practice, with the objective of building a rich conversation about migration and HIB. Dr. Karen Fisher will act as a respondent, drawing together themes from other organizers and soliciting audience participation. Our goal is to foster conversation and create a space of skill sharing. Dialogue between panelists, and between panelists and the audience, is vital to developing the most complex understanding of needs for LIS research in this area.

References

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