

Theories of Information Behavior edited by Karen E. Fisher, Sanda Erdelez, and Lynne (E.F.) McKechnie. Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc., 2005. 431 pp. ISBN 1-57387-230-X.

It is natural to think of information behavior theories as being inherent to the library and information fields, and yet scholars in an expanding number of academic disciplines are discovering and applying these principles to their own research. Hundreds of studies show the impact of information behavior on topics varying from voting patterns, health consumer habits, business and marketing trends, and human-computer interactions to a myriad of issues in education. At the same time, information professionals are also exploring, applying, and integrating models and theories from other disciplines into their own research. As communication technology advances and information permeate all aspects of society in multiple formats, people are becoming more active seekers and consumers of information. So what patterns of information behavior can be discerned among which individuals and in what situations? Which circumstances are most conducive to optimal information behavior and how can those circumstances best be integrated into the public environment and individual conscience?

Theories of Information Behavior is an assembly of short readings on 72 different theories and models developed both from within the library and information fields and from disciplines in other social and cognitive sciences. The editors, Karen Fisher, Sandra Erdelez, and Lynne McKechnie state that “*Theories of Information Behavior* purports to facilitate theory building and use, to make conceptual engagement easier...[it] provides authoritative entries for metatheories, theories, researchers, students, and practitioners as a ready reference guide to conceptual frameworks relevant to information behavior research” (p. xx). The variety of entries reflect the perspective of T.D. Wilson that information behavior is broader than information seeking behavior; that it is the complete range of human behavior “in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking, and information use” (p. xix).

The first three chapters of this book are each written by leading experts in the information behavior field. Marcia Bates’ chapter, “An Introduction to Metatheories, Theories, and Models,” gives an overview to the basic theoretical concepts and their uses in library and information research. She methodically defines these concepts, gives examples of their applications in research, and discusses a number of epistemological approaches that have been employed in the field. The second chapter, “What Methodology Does to Theory: Sense-Making Methodology as Exemplar” by Brenda Dervin, explores the idea that the tensions created by two types of theory – substantive and metatheory – can be eased by

methodologies that are based in firm philosophical considerations. Substantive theories are those which are derived from observation, the ideas used to explain an observed phenomenon. Metatheories are the preconceived ideas which direct observation. Dervin states that methodological explanations can “provide a common system of articulation” which can allow independent comparisons between two substantive theories. She expands upon her explanation by using her Sense-Making Methodology as an example. In the third chapter, “Evolution in Information Behavior Modeling: Wilson’s Model,” T. D. Wilson demonstrates how an information model evolves and develops over time using his own experience as an example. All three chapters make an important backdrop to understanding the context and vocabularies used throughout the rest of the book. A novice researcher would benefit from reading these chapters, especially Bates’ chapter, to strengthen their background understanding before commencing a study of the various theories. Seasoned researchers from outside the library and information sciences (LIS) may wish to do the same. As a group they make an excellent introduction to the theories themselves.

The second part of the book consists of 72 chapters on specific information behavior theories written by 85 scholars from ten different countries. The chapters average four pages in length and include a precise definition of the theory or model, its development, context, critiques, applications within library and information studies, and a list of references and readings. They are arranged in alphabetical order by theory name ranging from Diane Nahl’s chapter on “Affective Load” to “World Wide Web Information Seeking” by Don Turnbull.

Theories developed by scholars in the LIS discipline that appear in this book include such prominent ideas as Nicholas Belkin’s Anomalous State of Knowledge (ASK); Berrypicking by Marcia Bates; Carol Kuhlthau’s Information Search Process; and Robert Taylor’s Question-Negotiation. These and other classic theories are heavily cited throughout the LIS literature, and any student of the discipline should be familiar with their concepts. Some of the theories included in this book are prominent across a wide variety of disciplines, with which students in all the social sciences should acquaint themselves. These include Lev Vygotsky’s “Zone of Proximal Development;” George Zipf’s “Principle of Least Effort;” and “Social Positioning.” Many of the entries are less well known, but LIS scholars have fused and grafted their principles into current research, creating a cross-fertilization of ideas that further enriches the field.

This aspect is especially exciting – theories that have been validated through the scholarly process that can be applied to the study of information seeking behavior outside of the traditional institutional realms like libraries and academia, and thus include groups who are underrepresented in the LIS literature. This kind of broad perception of information behavior forces a realignment of

thoughts on the interdisciplinary permeation of information seeking and its endless combinations of circumstances and factors.

Theories of Information Behavior is almost encyclopedic in its scope of information behavior theories, models, and trends. Very few other resources are comparable. One can find references to many of the theories sprinkled throughout other sources such as the *International Encyclopedia of Information and Library Science* (Feathers, 2003) and the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* (Kent, 1981), but not the exclusive focus on the information theories with such precise definitions and examples. Donald Case's excellent book, *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior* (2002) covers many of the same topics but is structured more like a textbook; *Theories of Information Behavior* is a more practical work for focused guidance.

As the editors state in the preface to this volume, "Information behavior researchers are among the highest users of theory within the library and information science research" (p.xx). The three introductory chapters provide an excellent framework for understanding the context of theory in information behavior, and the wide variety of theories included in this work make it the most comprehensive of its kind. It is imperative that students and scholars of LIS be familiar with the concepts and theories in this book. Researchers from other fields that cross into information seeking and behavior would also benefit from the examples of cross-disciplinary use of classic theories.

References

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Reviewer

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