

A theoretical exploration of information behaviour: a power perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to explore and propose a way of using power as a theoretical anchor to investigate the information behaviour of people in work roles.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reviews literature on power relevant to the information disciplines. Various models of power are described, and a more sophisticated view, which takes a relational approach to power, is used to suggest how information related behaviour could be investigated.

Findings – In this paper, power is regarded as a pervasive phenomenon involved in all aspects of individual lives, including the aspects emanating from work roles performed by individuals, thus manifesting itself as part of the relationships in the organisation. The paper suggests a framework that links information behaviour to power by arguing that power relations that form part of the processes of the work roles induce the information behaviour exhibited by those people. The paper concludes by pointing to a need for information behaviour researchers to consider power as central to understanding how people seek and use information.

Originality/value – The framework could be used as a tool for designing studies that will enable the collection of data on information behaviour.

Keywords Behaviour, Information control, Knowledge management

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

This paper discusses how power could be used as a theoretical anchor for researching the information behaviour of people in work roles. Through a discussion of various ways of conceptualising power in information related literature sources, the paper outlines some propositions which provide insights for designing studies that could enhance our understanding of information behaviour. Literature on power shows that the concept has developed over time, from viewing power as a simple phenomenon that an individual could either have or not have to a more complex relational approach where power is viewed as a relationship between forces (Introna, 1997). While useful propositions are outlined from the various conceptualisations of power in this paper, the more sophisticated relational approach to power put forward by Introna is found to have a higher capability of enhancing our understanding of information behaviour. This paper hopes to stimulate debate amongst information behaviour researchers to look deeper into the potential of the power phenomenon in the development of theories that explain specific user behaviour that is information-related.

Researchers in the information discipline(s) have always maintained that there is a relationship between information and power. For example, the use of the metaphor

“information is power” has dominated discussions for those who research information issues (Hirschheim and Newman, 1991). Feldman and March (1981) maintain that the mere possession of information can also be a source of power. Those who possess or have access to certain information can use it to further their interests. Therefore, it can be inferred that there is a relationship between information behaviour and power. Individuals who want to gain the power of information would exhibit an information behaviour that enables them to come into possession and subsequently use the information. Information behaviour such as hoarding information, willingness to share information, filtering information, searching for information could be explained by an individual’s intention to gain “information power”. This means the power one anticipates to either gain or lose influences the kind of information behaviour he or she exhibits when in need of information. For instance, if searching for more information could improve one’s position in terms of power relationships, then the individual will exhibit more of such behaviour. Alternatively, if filtering of information and allowing only information that favours the individual’s position in the power relationships is judged as advantageous in terms of power gains, then such behaviour will be preferred and more of it will be exhibited. Consequently, it can be argued that the information behaviour exhibited could be explained by the effect that it will have on the power relationships in which the individual is involved.

Another point that is closely related to information and power relates to professional knowledge. Available literature in organisational studies has shown that professional knowledge can be used as a source of power (Mintzberg, 1979; Pfeffer, 1981). This means that people who have some special knowledge, not possessed by other members in a particular group, can influence the thought and behaviour of those who do not have such knowledge. Consequently, the behaviour of those involved in areas of such knowledge disparity will be influenced and the professional knowledge as a source of power could form the basis for explaining the behaviour exhibited under those circumstances.

In light of the discussion put forward above, an attempt to relate power to the information behaviour of people should not come as a surprise. Researchers of information management have long appreciated that such understanding can strengthen information management practices in organisations. Alternatively, information management practices could aim towards influencing the power relationships themselves. For instance, Zuboff (1984) maintains that information management practices can be used as a tool for strengthening political positions in organisations. Here political positions refer to power bases of individuals in the organisation, and could be strengthened by managing information with a view to influencing the way individuals would come into possession of information when they need it. Thus, such information management practice indirectly influences the behaviour exhibited when individuals have to acquire and use information.

In a different context Introna (1999), when giving a keynote address at the Second International Conference on Research in Information Needs, Seeking and Use in Different Contexts, advocated strengthening the research of power in relation to information behaviour. However, it is interesting to note that while the thrust of the conference was to develop a theoretical framework to underpin robust information behaviour research, none of the other papers that were presented (or even in subsequent research on information behaviour in general) made an attempt to explore

how power, as alluded to by Introna, could be an area to give a fundamental theoretical framework for researching information behaviour. According to Introna (1999), power is an extremely important factor with great potential to explain the complexities related to information and people in various contexts. This paper, therefore, makes a modest contribution to the information behaviour research by discussing power as a possible theoretical “leg” to understanding the information behaviour of people in work roles.

Information behaviour

An implicit assumption in this paper is that information behaviour is a concept that has been extensively investigated in the literature. The shortfall is in developing both general and low-level theoretical frameworks related to information behaviour. Even to date researchers are still grappling with developing an overarching theory that underpins research in information behaviour. Such theoretical framework is critical to designing research that furthers our understating of information behaviour.

Regarding the definition of information behaviour, first and foremost it must be noted that the term has been a subject of debate for some time. In December 1999, a debate that involved some of the leading scholars in the field of information science on the JSSE listserv (<http://web.utk.edu/~gwhitney/jesse.html>) focused on the term “information behaviour”. Various points were raised about the term, including that the term is not grammatically correct because information behaviour implies the behaviour of information, yet information cannot be said to “behave”; it is people who behave.

In defining the way forward, there were various suggestions including “human information behaviour” as a more appropriate and grammatically correct term. Information seeking behaviour was suggested but found to be too restrictive, as it does not reflect the end state of the behaviour following the acquisition of information. It only covers part of the facets that are studied in information behaviour (perhaps it is the emphasis on the information seeking that has resulted in the information use aspect not receiving much attention in an analytical way in the studies (Vakkari, 1997)).

Notwithstanding the different views, the use of the term “information behaviour” has been adopted and the term has become standard in user studies. However, researchers need to be clear on what the term refers to when they use it in their studies. This paper will not put forward any complicated definition of information behaviour, but rather use the term as defined by Davenport (1997) to refer to how people approach and handle information. I find this definition interesting because of its parsimony whilst at the same time highlighting critical elements worth noting when studying information behaviour, namely approaching and handling of information by people.

Trends in information behaviour research

Although the interest to research information behaviour dates back to the early 1960s (Hektor, 2001, p. 40), the information user was never considered as a unit of analysis in the studies at the beginning (Dervin and Nilan, 1986; Taylor, 1991, p. 218; Wilson, 2000b, p. 49). According to Wilson (1999, p. 250) researchers focused on counting many things from the number of visits to information resources, number of subscriptions and number of information sources consulted. Consequently, information needs, seeking

information behaviour cannot be isolated from its contexts" because the context provides a framework in which people make meaning of their experiences (Cool, 2001, p. 8).

The social approach rejects and criticises the cognitive approach for "stripping the individual" from the context in which the information behaviour takes place and suggests the widening of the scope of analysis from the individual level to include contextual factors when studying information behaviour. Wilson (1981, p. 9) suggests "because the situations in which information is sought and used are social interactions, purely cognitive conceptions of information need are probably inadequate for research purposes".

According to Pettigrew *et al.* (2001, p. 54) the social approaches studies "emerged slowly during the early 1990s and are becoming increasingly prominent" in studies of information behaviour. These studies are mainly concerned with the meaning and values related to the social, socio-cultural and socio-linguistic facets of information behaviour. The approach emphasises that the social context in which the information behaviour takes place needs to be analysed too as factors influencing the information behaviour of the actors (Talja *et al.*, 1999, pp. 752-754). Jacob and Shaw (1998) note that understanding the socio-cultural environments in which the individual participates can contribute to the understanding of the process of knowledge generation, representation and organisation and retrieval aspects in information behaviour.

Literature on information behaviour shows that researchers who follow the social approach struggle with the ambiguity of the definition of context. Attempts to define context have proved to be difficult. Cool (2001, p. 8) suggests that contexts are frameworks of meaning and are socially defined settings in which information users are found. This means context is found everywhere when an individual interacts with information. Dervin (1997, p. 32) says:

Context is something you swim in like a fish. You are in it. It is in you.

Despite these problems, however, the context or social aspects in which the information process(es) are embedded are considered extremely important when studying information behaviour (Talja, 1997) and such context needs to be analysed if information behaviour is to be understood.

The social approach to studying information behaviour has yielded positive results in terms of theory development in information behaviour studies. The seminal works by Chatman (1996, 1999, 2001) are examples. Drawing from her series of studies, Chatman developed three theoretical frameworks including theory of information poverty, theory of life in the round and theory of normative behaviour. These theories have been found to be prudent to explain the information behaviour of the groups studied.

Despite the positive developments from the various approaches to information behaviour, an examination of the literature shows a lack of the power perspective in the approaches. This paper therefore suggests a power perspective as a critical theoretical approach to analysing the information behaviour of people. From the discussion of power, the paper outlines some propositions that could be used as a basis for designing studies in information behaviour. It is hoped that the approach will enhance theory in information behaviour research.

Power and information behaviour

The concept of power is very elusive. We talk about power everyday of our lives and are consciously or unconsciously involved with it when we are at home, work, or at a social function. It pervades everything that we do (Introna, 1997). Therefore, it also makes logical sense to assume that power could be the basis for explaining the information behaviour of people. Perhaps this pervasiveness of power is the reason for the difficulty in coming up with a definition that suits all the different contexts in which power is experienced.

There have been many attempts to define power by researchers in the social science arena but with varied success (Koop and Grant, 1993; Prakken, 2000, p. 140; Swingle, 1976, p. 46). This paper does not attempt to put forward yet another definition, but to provide some essential attributes that relate to power and are essential in giving guidance to explain information behaviour. An attempt is made to put forward an argument for what power does to develop insights on its effects on the way people behave towards information.

Extant literature has classified power according to sources or bases, which are referred to as power bases. The most common types of these power bases are the reward power, coercive power, referent power, legitimate power, expertise power and informational power (Raven, 1993, p. 229; Lam, 1996, p. 14) and are defined as follows:

- Coercive power – draws on one's ability to threaten or administer some form of punishment.
- Reward power – based on the promise of monetary or non-monetary compensation by the individual who has control of the resources.
- Legitimate power – draws on one's right to influence.
- Referent power – based on target's identification with influencing agent as model.
- Expert power – draws on one's superior knowledge.
- Informational power – based on the ability to convince by (rational) argumentation.

Available literature sources show that, within the types of power outlined above, there are various ways of conceptualising it. For instance, power can be conceptualised as a facet of human relationships. This means it can be discussed in terms of its influence on the relationships between people. Furthermore, "power can be viewed as a personal trait or power can be viewed as a consequence of a position within a hierarchy" (Horton, 2003, p. 122). This means power can be thought of as something that people can have and use as a tool and people could use it to promote their interests.

What are the implications for researching information behaviour?

The design of an information behaviour study should be premised on a clear understanding of the types of power that are involved with those who are studied. That means the researcher needs to find out about the nature of the power involved, whether it is coercive, reward, legitimate, referent, expert or informational in nature.

A clear account of the conceptualisation of power adopted is critical. For instance, when power is viewed as a personal trait, it is proposed that in designing an information behaviour study the research should aim at finding out who possesses

power and who does not. Furthermore, the type of power that is possessed by individuals should form the basis for determining the information behaviour exhibited. Knowledge of the power distribution can help one to predict the kind of information behaviour that is likely to be exhibited. For instance, those who are in possession of power may hoard information and focus on filtering information to pass only that which does not dispossess them of the power. Those who do not have the power may engage in more searching and applying search strategies that are geared to help them to gain power. Alternatively, if power is viewed as a relationship between forces, then there is a need to clarify the relationships involved. The researcher should aim at determining the magnitude, direction and the source of the force. Such a clarification will enable the researcher to analytically relate power to information behaviour.

The other view of power that has attracted the attention of several information researchers draws from the political view in organisational studies (see Davenport, 1997; Travnica, 2005). These studies postulate that organisational politics play a central influence in the way information is handled by people. In this view the use of information is regarded as a political issue and power relations are an implicit part of the processes generated by the politics of those involved. Researching information should be driven by the desire to understand the political environment of the individuals. Through such knowledge the researcher will be able to understand the reason behind the information behaviour that the individuals exhibit. This means the political behaviour of those involved will determine the way to approach and handle information.

Knights and Murray (1994, p. 38) maintain a general view that political activities are the focal processes "through which organisations are sustained, reproduced or transformed". In this regard the information behaviour of people may act as an instrument of change, and transform organisations through their effects on the various political-driven processes in which those who use information are involved. When we investigate information behaviour amongst people in work roles, there will always be power (here defined by the politics amongst those involved) issues involved. Studies should therefore be designed with the view to capture how those political issues influence the information behaviour of people. For instance, information behaviour exhibited when considering a highly political issue is expected to differ from a situation where issues are not highly political. This means that the expectation is that changes in the information behaviour exhibited are in consonant with the political activities as described by Knights and Murray.

Another view of power comes from the work of Clegg (1989), who sees power as something that is socially contested. This view is supported by Boland (1987) when he suggests that power follows from the dialogue of actors who attempt to interpret and understand a phenomenon in relation to their organisation. Power tends to have different meanings for different people because different interpretations lead to variations in the way it is understood and articulated. The view of power as a socially contested phenomenon has implications for the ways in which power is handled in research. Knights and Morgan (1990) concur with Clegg (1989) and Boland (1987) when they point out that the variations in the meaning of power cause its definition to be situation dependent. It is therefore unproductive for researchers to grapple with defining power because it changes with the situations that are being addressed. Knights and Morgan (1990) suggest that it will be more productive to investigate the

manifestations, mechanisms or exercise of power. In this regard, information behaviour should be regarded as a manifestation of power. Drawing from the framework discussed above, it is proposed that there is a mutual relationship between power and the information behaviour of people. Consequently, researchers should examine the complexities and various dimensions of information behaviour by explicitly considering it as an embodiment of power. It is suggested in this paper that the effect of power on information behaviour should be of interest to those who design empirical studies to collect data that will lead to the development of low-level theoretical models to enhance understanding of the information behaviour of individuals involved in power relationships.

Another conceptualisation of power draws from the work of Horton (1998) who discusses four dimensions of power. These dimensions provide a framework for understanding and making sense of power. This framework, which was developed by Hardy (1994), is based on the work of Lukes (1974). Lukes himself focuses on three dimensions. According to Lukes (1974), these dimensions of power represent the different views of looking at power that were developed over time.

The first dimension of power seeks to examine the actual behaviour in making decisions. This dimension takes an intuitive view that power exists, for example, when "a person A gets a person B to do (or be done to) something that is not in B's interest to do". In this case, power is believed to reside with the "winner" who is "A". According to Lukes (1974), this dimension of power focuses upon real activities such as the making of decisions. However, when studying decisions that have been made, no account is taken of those issues that may have been ignored or not taken into account for one reason or another (Horton, 2003). Furthermore, it can be observed that one underlying assumption in this dimension of power is that power often has to be exercised when there is a difference in the interests of those who are involved.

An important factor in this dimension of power is the interest of the individual when performing a role. In researching information behaviour, one of the issues that should be clarified by the researcher are the interests of those studied, that is what interests they would like served when they approach and handle information. From this view of power it is proposed that when people engage in roles where there are differences in the interests, they will tend to seek and use information to further their interests. Information behaviour researchers should focus on analytically determining the interests of individuals as a basis for understanding how people will then approach and handle information.

The second dimension of power relates to the ways in which individuals or groups may dominate others in relation to decision-making. Power is understood to exist, for example, when "a person A limits the set of possible actions available to B to only those that serve the interest of A". For example, a manager in an organisation may control the agenda for a meeting by allowing only those items that serve his or her interests to be discussed, or, intentionally, excluding some people by not informing them of the meeting. Again, it should be noted that this dimension of power also focuses on behavioural aspects and concrete actions, which can either result in a decision taken or not taken (Lukes, 1974). Like the first dimension of power, it also falls short to explain the exercise of power through the inactivity of people (Horton, 2003).

The third dimension of power exists, for example, when "a person A limits or controls the values and preferences used by B to select possible actions to only those

that would lead to the actions that serve A's interests". For example, communities instil certain (control and limit) values and preferences on children. This results in the children recognising those values that are preferred by the community to which they belong. An important point to note about the third dimension of power is that the exercise of power does not necessarily take place when there is conflict or when a decision has to be made. This dimension of power has an orientation to a view of power that acknowledges the ways in which issues can be prevented from arising at all, such as avoiding conflict (or differences in interests) altogether.

One of the main contributions of the third dimension of power is to allow us to think beyond associating power with conflict (differences in interests). This means power can be exercised in the absence of a conflict. Despite this contribution, there are still some practical problems that are unresolved. Hardy (1994) and Lukes (1974) suggest that the issue of why opposition and conflict would not arise is not clear. Furthermore, this conceptualisation of power does not provide guidance for us to understand why issues may be controlled or limited by those who exercise power. Lukes (1974) tries to provide guidance to the conceptualisations of power by distinguishing between instrumental power and symbolic power. Instrumental power addresses dimensions one and two discussed above. According to Hardy (1994), instrumental power is exercised when there is a desire to secure an outcome against opposition. Symbolic power addresses the third dimension discussed above and is concerned with the unobtrusive use of power to secure an outcome by preventing conflict from arising.

The proposition outlined from this view relates to the control or that which the individual intends to prevent. In order to understand information behaviour the researcher needs to understand what and how the information user intends to control the situation without necessarily having a conflict. An example of such behaviour could be when the individual uses information in training staff members in an organisation. In this regard, training is instituted without conflict and the view is to eventually change the behaviour of those being trained.

Knights and Morgan (1990) argue that one of the fundamental flaws with the three dimensions of power discussed above is their deterministic nature, with power seen in the sense of a cause-effect relationship. The sense that power has to be in the possession of someone who eventually brings about the effect (influence) by using it to his or her advantage is also viewed as problematic. According to Knights and Morgan (1990) this power view is limited and does not adequately reflect work situations where a considerable amount of what is happening differs from that which is intended (i.e. unintended outcomes).

In an attempt to resolve the problems arising from the conceptualisations of power discussed above, Hardy (1994) proposed a fourth dimension of power, which is referred to as the conceptualisation of power that "addresses the power of the system". This framework postulates that power is neither given nor received, but exercised and only exists in action (Foucault, 1980). Power is regarded as a pervasive phenomenon that is concerned with relationships between parties (Hardy, 1994). Power can be understood as taking the form of a web-like structure in an organisation, manifesting itself as part of the relationships in the organisation. A fundamental notion implicit in this dimension of power is the "unconscious acceptance of the cultures and subcultures, rules, norms and values of how the organisation does things with the combination of structural and non-structural mechanisms of the system" (Berghout *et al.*, 2005, p. 33).

Another interesting notion following on from the fourth dimension of power is the framework that considers three circuits of power. These are the episodic circuit, the social integration circuit and the system integration circuit (Clegg, 1989). According to Introna (1997), in the episodic circuit power is manifested by agents capable of producing their intended outcomes by the use of controlled resources and established outcomes. The social integration circuits consist of norms, rules and meanings of a particular group and the technical integration circuits comprise of technical means and techniques of production. These three circuits provide a way of exploring and understanding power as a network of relationships. In this regard we can think of power as existing as relationships or simply by considering every relationship as already a relationship of power (Berghout *et al.*, 2005, p. 33; Introna, 1997).

Power is regarded as a relation between forces and exists only in relationships (Farace *et al.*, 1997). People enter into those power relationships either consciously or unconsciously. In this regard, power itself is not something that has a location as an objective being. Power emerges from the interactions of a network of forces. This force is referred to as “the capacity to act or be acted upon” (Introna, 1997, p. 145) and is directed on the actions, while power continuously shifts and circulates in relation to those actions. The individuals experience the changing situations due to the force relations because they are in the network of power relations, and they can also exercise power. There is no single direction in which power can be said to act. Any direction is possible.

Again, as mentioned earlier when using the above notion of power, the information behaviour is considered as a manifestation of the power relations that characterise the processes undertaken by people in work roles. People experience power relations in distinct ways that determine the ways they behave towards information. Differences in the information behaviour exhibited by people performing organisational roles are a result of the variations in the power bases of those people.

What propositions can be made? The information behaviour exhibited by individuals can be understood as a reaction induced by power relations that people experience at a particular moment in their roles. These power relations are always changing and are never quite the same at different moments in the work process. Likewise, the information behaviour exhibited by people is always changing. For example, the power relations that an individual experiences when performing the role of a chairperson in a meeting may predispose him or her to a particular information behaviour which may be totally different from when the same person is just attending a meeting as a participant.

A second point that can be drawn from this notion of power is the information behaviour in relation to the exercise of power by those in work roles. People exercise power in their roles in the way they apply and use information. Again it can be noted that the application and use of information embodies mechanisms of power.

According to Introna (1997) power is exercised and only exists in actions. Likewise, it can be argued that the actions that take place in the seeking and use of information are the ones in which power is exercised. These mechanisms are themselves sources of power and give people the capability to influence the decisions that result from the processes in the organisations through their roles (cf. Pfeffer, 1981).

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework on the relationship between information behaviour and power relations. The argument put forward is that it is

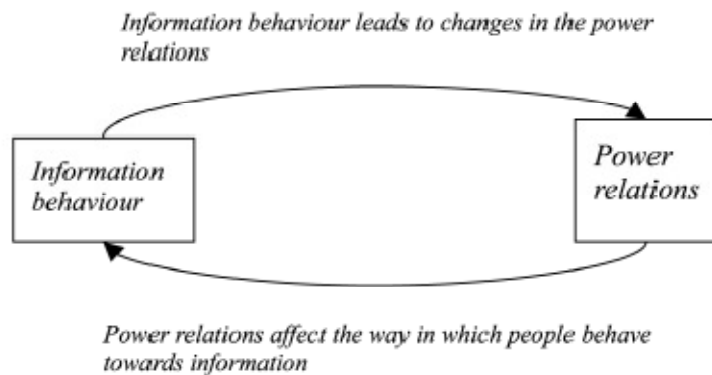


Figure 1.
Relationships between
information behaviour and
power relations

productive to think of information behaviour in terms of being influenced by, or induced by, the power relations existing in relationships into which those in work roles enter. It is suggested that information behaviour should be studied with the understanding of its capability to respond to power relations.

As previously mentioned, the conclusion that is drawn from this discussion implies that there is a mutual relationship between power relations and the factors that determine the information behaviour of people. The changing power relations induce certain information behaviours in people or, stated in a different way, the information behaviour that people in work roles exhibit are a response to changing power relations and are associated with the work processes that people are engaged in. It can also be argued that power relations affect information behaviour through their effect on the power disparities in relationships. Conversely, the information behaviour exhibited by people influences the disparity in the power relationships.

The author regards the framework of power relations described above essential to understanding the information behaviour of people in work roles. The framework sheds light on some critical areas that underlie the basis on which we should collect data that will enable us to enhance our understanding of information behaviour.

Situational example

In order to illustrate the discussion above, an example is provided of an author using information when writing an article. While this example could be explained in various ways, a power perspective is taken here for the purpose of illustration. Imagine an author who is trying to write an article for publication. The process of writing an article makes him/her think of the reviewers of the article and that creates an imaginary relationship between this author and the reviewers. Hence, power relations come into play. The author tries to get an imaginary picture of what kind of people these reviewers are and how he/she can write an article to be published in that journal. Such information can be obtained by looking at the kind of journal that the article is going to be published in, its reputation in terms of "journal impact factor". In addition, the author may check the credentials of the editors and the publisher. Such information would give the author an idea of the kind of article that the journal would publish. A more reputable journal means there will be more competition as many top scholars in the field would be presenting their articles for publication. This means the author also judges himself/herself against the other authors who are likely to have articles for

publication. Furthermore, the author looks at the target audience that is going to read the article. Another element will be the recognition by the author's institution if the article gets published in that particular journal.

In the example described above it is clear that the reviewers, other authors and the author's institution (of course there will be other factors not described in the above example) create a network of forces which interacts with the author. Drawing from Introna (1997), it follows that power emerges from this network of forces. This emerging power is the one that will influence the way the author is going to approach and handle the information that he/she presents in the article. In that regard, we can conclude that the way the author is going to seek and use information is influenced by the emerging power.

To summarise, it can be observed that power relations are an inevitable part of any relationship between people processes. People experience power relations in distinct ways, which determine the ways they approach and handle information. Power differences amongst the participants in the work process are mainly a result of the variations in the power bases of the participants. The pattern of information behaviour that the people exhibit can be understood as a reaction induced by power relations that a person experiences at a particular moment. These power relations are always changing and never quite the same at different moments in the work process. Likewise, the pattern of information seeking and use exhibited by the individuals is always changing. For instance, power relations that an individual in a work place experiences when dealing with experts on a project may predispose him/her to do more of one information activity, such as verification of facts. Another experience of power relations, such as dealing with a layperson, may predispose the individual to more packaging of information. Even the manner of packaging may differ in relation to the experience of the power relations, whether the other person has the power to affect the outcome by using information or their influence is not that important.

Implications for designing studies

When designing an information behaviour study from the power perspective, the objective will be to understand the interplay between the information user and the context of the work role in terms of the power. Secondly, power should not only be considered as counterproductive. Power should also be looked at as having the potential to induce desirable information behaviour in those who experience it. Thus, one should consider investigating a mutual relationship between power relations and the information behaviour exhibited by people.

In addition, the information behaviour that individuals exhibit could be understood as a reaction induced by power relations that an individual experiences at a particular moment in time. The implication of such an understanding lies in the choice of factors when designing a study. Study designs relevant to further our understanding should, for instance, allow the researcher:

- to look deeper into the way power relations manifest themselves;
- understand how the various manifestations of power relations affect the individual's behaviour towards information;
- relate information behaviour to the power relationship; and
- understand the kind of power relations created by the roles that individuals perform.

Conclusions and suggestions

In this paper, a case of power as an alternative framework for user studies researchers to use for analysing the information behaviour of people has been put forward. It was found that the information behaviour exhibited by the users could be explained in terms of power relations that are part of the relationships in the processes that people are involved with. These findings could have a profound effect on user studies research by providing new insights into thinking how information behaviour occurs.

In view of the discussion of power relations, it is suggested that power should be viewed as a critical component that determines the information behaviour exhibited by people. The factors that define the way people behave towards information emerge in response to the changing power relations and therefore understanding those power relations can provide a better understanding of the way people seek and use information in the ways that they do.

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