Auto-hermeneutics: A phenomenological approach to information experience

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A B S T R A C T

The need for methodologically rigorous approaches to the study of human experience in LIS has emerged in recent years. Auto-hermeneutics is a research approach that offers a systematic way to study one's own experiences with information, allowing investigators to explore yet-undocumented contexts, setting precedents for further work in these areas and ultimately deepening our understanding of information experiences. This articulation of auto-hermeneutics is based on the phenomenological method of Heidegger and draws principles from systematic self-observation and interpretative phenomenological analysis. Similarities and differences among auto-hermeneutics and other automethodologies are discussed, along with guidelines for assessing auto-hermeneutic research. Finally, an example of an auto-hermeneutic study illustrates the unique contributions this approach affords.

1. Introduction

Though information has been investigated through many lenses, most information behavior research has focused on information seeking (Bates, 2010; Case, 2016; Fidel, 2012). For decades, scholars have been calling for more research on the outcomes of information seeking (Case & O'Connor, 2016). Among these outcomes, people's in-the-moment engagement with information has been identified as an area in particular need of characterization (Kari, 2007). To this end, the research area of information experience has emerged. Bruce, Davis, Hughes, Partridge, and Stoodley (2014) offer a collection of scholarship on information experience, calling for the consideration of novel methodological approaches to information experience as a research object.

One such methodological approach is auto-hermeneutics, which offers a systematic way to explore and describe the ontological nature of one's own personally lived experience. For library and information science (LIS) researchers, auto-hermeneutics allows for consideration of novel questions regarding information experience and exploration of yet-undocumented contexts, setting precedents for further work in these areas and deepening the understanding of information phenomena.

2. Why study the self?

"Know thyself," implores the Delphic maxim. These words have been carried from a pillar in ancient Greece to the furthest reaches of cyberspace, so that today, over 1600 years after the last priestess presided

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over Mount Parnassus, the phrase is common—even banal. What good reason is there to know oneself beyond vapid egoism? Is researching the self merely another instance of academic navel-gazing, or does it have real utility?

Western philosophy engendered *know thyself*, and perhaps Eastern philosophy can explain why. The Zen tradition, for example, is based on the principle that only by knowing the self can the self be forgotten. Renowned Buddhist teacher Dogen-zenji put it this way: "To study Buddhism is to study ourselves. To study ourselves is to forget ourselves" (Suzuki, 1970, p. 79). Similarly, Lao Tsu says in the *Tao Te Ching*: "Knowing the mother, one also knows the sons. Knowing the sons, yet remaining in touch with the mother …" (ch. 52). This ancient wisdom suggests that studying one aspect of reality (in this case, the self) can lead to insights regarding other, connected aspects of reality. Put differently, such research can contribute to "understanding"—appreciation of the relational structure of different pieces of knowledge (Kvanvig, 2003)—which has been proposed as the key epistemic aim in LIS research and practice (Bawden, 2016).

The view that studying an individual part can lead to an understanding of something greater has been echoed by numerous researchers in the social sciences. Bromley (1986) argues for the single-case study as a legitimate and valuable method of scientific inquiry, both within and beyond the discipline of psychology. In particular, he emphasizes the value of studying cases in their real-world contexts. Similarly, Bruner (1986) extolls narrative research, arguing that humans have two ways of knowing and reasoning: first, through deductive logic, and second, through narrative. Through logic, discourse begins with a general theory and moves toward specific examples, arguing for truth. Through narrative, discourse begins with examples and works its way toward general

theory, arguing for lifelikeness. Indeed, modern psychology supports the notion that it is through narrative that people form their identities and that researchers come to know human behavior generally (McAdams, 2001). Smith, Harré, and van Langenhove (1995) argue that the formulation of theory should stem from intensive idiographic studies, moving from specific observations to general principles.

These are compelling validations for the single-case study in human behavior research, but there are also important reasons to study the self in particular. First, it is convenient, which should not go unappreciated. Researchers have ongoing access to themselves. Automethodologies allow for longitudinal, demanding, and speculative—perhaps even invasive—research that might otherwise be difficult to conduct, especially when outside funding is unavailable. Researchers also have more access to their own thoughts than they do to those of others. Thus researching the self may potentiate deeper and more precise and accurate data collection. Rigorous methods for doing so would respond well to Bates' (2004) appeal for information-related inquiry that allows and encourages participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences so as to be valid within the person-centered research paradigm. Moreover, automethodologies may be uniquely effective for making certain advances in the social sciences. For instance, philosophers of science such as Harding (2015) argue that each researcher (and research community) operates from a particular standpoint which cannot be overcome; obfuscating this standpoint under the guise of disinterested "objectivity" is merely deception, while embracing it can reveal phenomena and biases that were previously hidden.

3. Two approaches to the study of the self

However, even if auto-hermeneutics is recognized as a useful methodology, there is the question of how researchers can *know themselves* in the first place. Fortunately, in recent decades, the academic study of the self has been developed in a number of ways. In LIS, autoethnography is perhaps the most well-known of automethodologies. Self-study has also been recognized as an automethodological approach.

3.1. Autoethnography

Stemming from ethnography, autoethnography allows a researcher to explore their place in a culture, emphasizing the relationship between self and other (Chang, 2008). In general, autoethnography seeks to discover the amalgamated experience of living within a culture rather than a single, discrete experience. This is often accomplished through narrative analysis. As they rely so heavily on narrative, autoethnographies tend to be characterized by their evocative and personal writing styles (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In conducting autoethnography, a researcher draws on their richly nuanced understanding of the context under study; such understanding may not always be available to a researcher who is studying a foreign culture.

Though autoethnography is mostly used in anthropology (Chang, 2008), the approach has been adopted by some researchers in LIS. Guzik (2013) discusses the usefulness of autoethnography in LIS research, particularly to help information professionals become aware of and analyze their cultural assumptions in order to improve the development of programs and services. Guzik (2013) gives the example of Michels (2010), who investigated his experience as both a PhD student and librarian in an academic library over the course of a year. As an exploratory endeavor, Michels chose to represent his findings through poems and videos, which were found to resonate with his audiences and reveal some of the hidden assumptions that information professionals have about the people they serve. Another autoethnographic study in LIS is presented by Polkinghorne (2012), who analyzed herself as an information literacy instructor in order to uncover the factors—such as a sense of unpreparedness—that contributed to how she conducted instruction. Both studies were meant to help improve practice.

As these studies demonstrate, autoethnography in LIS is aligned with action research and critical methodologies in seeking to improve practice (Mills & Birks, 2014). This focus on practice stems from the emphasis in the autoethnographic approach on the relationship between self and other in ongoing cultural engagement. For research questions that seek a deep ontological characterization of a phenomenon, or those that wish to take a purely descriptive rather than critical stance, other methodologies may be better suited. Still automethodologists draw on the rich tradition of autoethnography, which includes standards of practice and critiques (e.g., Holt, 2003), in order to inform their own studies.

3.2. Self-study

Educators have long employed automethodologies to improve their teaching, giving rise to self-study. This research tradition formally emerged in the 1990s as a systematic way to study the self in various roles of situated practice (Lassonde, Galman, & Kosnik, 2009). Self-study holds that only through the close examination of one's own practice can that practice be improved. Rather than comprising a specific methodology, self-study draws from a wide array of other methodologies and traditions, including interviewing, phenomenology, participatory research, artistic development, and ethnography (Lassonde et al., 2009). Because it focuses on improving practice, self-study is similar to how LIS researchers employ autoethnography.

One particular innovation of self-study is that it can be collaborative: a group of educators who individually engage in self-study can compare their findings and learn from each other, thus furthering the practice of the cohort as a whole (Lassonde et al., 2009). It should also be noted that collaborative autoethnography has recently emerged (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012), perhaps inspired by collaborative self-study. Collaborative autoethnography has found application in LIS research in a study on the information practices of caregivers (Anderson & Fourie, 2015). In a related way, self-study has also been employed on the organizational level when an organization studies its own practices. Van Cleave (2008), for example, documents the literacy assessment efforts of the San Francisco State University, in which a self-study was conducted using a survey that was distributed to teaching librarians, and the results informed organizational planning.

Thus far, it has been suggested that researching the self can offer a unique approach to building an understanding of phenomena of interest to LIS. Neither autoethnography nor self-study, however, has been able to address ontological questions regarding the essence of information phenomena. Hermeneutic phenomenology can contribute to this end.

4. Hermeneutic phenomenology and LIS

Human-centered research has become a focus of LIS in recent decades, but certain assumptions have been carried over from earlier positivist traditions (e.g., information as something impersonally observable and measurable) (Case, 2016). A number of scholars have emphasized the importance of clarifying key concepts in LIS, which requires untangling those assumptions (Day, 2000). One approach to doing so is offered by the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, first proposed for use in LIS by Graziano (1968) as a way to explore the essences and relationships among the phenomena of interest to LIS.

Phenomenology has been conceptualized and developed in diverse ways by scholars over the past century. Budd (2005) offers an overview of these developments as they concern LIS. In Budd's view the seemingly divergent approaches to phenomenology share a number of commonalities: they are inductive and descriptive, and they recognize that experience is richer than what our senses apprehend and that the world has no meaning apart from consciousness. Von Herrmann (2013) sees phenomenology as falling in two schools: the Husserlian school of reflective phenomenology, and the Heideggerian