Approaches to socio-cultural barriers to information seeking

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ABSTRACT

A conceptual analysis derived from the literature on sociocultural barriers to information seeking focuses on the features of such barriers and their impact on information seeking in diverse contexts. A typology is presented that identifies six main types of socio-cultural barriers: barriers due to language problems, barriers related to social stigma and cultural taboo, small-world related barriers, institutional arriers, organizational barriers, and barriers due to the lack of social and economic capital. Socio-cultural barriers are man-made constructs originating from social norms and cultural values. They have mainly an adverse impact on information seeking by restricting access to information sources and giving rise to negative emotions.

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1. Introduction

In the domain of information behavior research, key concepts like information need, information sharing, and information use are plagued by vagueness and multiple meanings (Fleming-May, 2014). Another example of a poorly defined concept in this domain is barriers to information seeking, the main focus of the present study.

To define the scope of the investigation, the specification of the main domains of information behavior originally proposed by Wilson (2000) and further elaborated by Jansen and Rieh (2010, p. 1518) appeared to be particularly useful. At the highest level of generality, human information behavior is the broadest domain, addressing all aspects of human information interactions with various forms of information. At a middle level, a subset is information-seeking behavior, which encompasses the range of information seeking employed in discovering and accessing information resources (both humans and systems) in response to goals and intentions. Finally, at the micro level, information searching behavior is a subset of information seeking, referring to the actions involved in interacting with an information search system, including information retrieval (IR). To strengthen the focus of the study, the present investigation concentrates on the domain of information seeking. As the boundary between the domains of information seeking and information searching has been blurred due to the increasing popularity of networked sources, the present study also looks at relevant investigations characterizing barriers to information searching. For the sake of simplicity, however, information searching is not discussed as a separate category; issues related to barriers to information searching are reviewed under the broader concept of information seeking. However, to sharpen the focus, barriers specifically related to IR were excluded (e.g., Borgman, 1996; Kumpulainen & Järvelin, 2012).

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In general, barriers can be understood as physical or immaterial "obstacles hindering, delaying or preventing access to information" (Swigon, 2011a, p. 475). The barriers can be internal or external to information seekers. Internal barriers arise from inside of an individual, and they can be divided into two main categories: affective and cognitive. Affective barriers typically stem from negative emotions such as fear of facing unpleasant facts while seeking health information. For example, cancer patients tend to prefer self-protection and guard themselves from aversive information by avoiding all information sources or venture in information seeking only to obtain positive information (but still avoid negative information). Thus, they prefer the strategy of "not knowing is better" (Lambert, Loiselle, & Macdonald, 2009, pp. 30–31). Examples of cognitive barriers include unawareness of relevant information sources and poor search skills. For instance, among persons 85 years and older, the ability to formulate information needs and seek information is often inhibited by declining cognition and loss of plasticity (Asla, 2013, p. 196). In contrast, external barriers originate outside an individual and are thus imposed. Barriers of this type may be spatial (e.g., long distance to a library), temporal (e.g., an absolute deadline limiting the time available for information seeking), or socio-cultural (e.g., bureaucratic inertia).

2. Problem statement

The present investigation contributes to basic research on information behavior by reviewing external barriers to information seeking concentrating specifically on one main type of external constraint, i.e., socio-cultural barriers. This focus was chosen for two reasons. First, although researchers have characterized such barriers since the 1970s, the findings have remained fragmentary and mainly descriptive. Thus, there is a need to elaborate the existing knowledge about socio-cultural barriers by putting the pieces together at a higher level of generality. Second, the study of such barriers also has practical implications

for the development of library and information services because the findings deepen our understanding of why and how cultural values and social norms constrain people's access to information.

In general, socio-cultural factors can be defined as a set of values, norms, roles, language, symbols, customs, moral and religious beliefs, taboos, perceptions, and preferences acquired by people as members of society (Giddens, 2006, pp. 1034–1036; Prinz, 2011). Such factors have double roles in that they both facilitate and constrain human action. In the former role, socio-cultural factors enable people to interact and live together. In the latter role, they appear as barriers delimiting the range of choices available to people at the individual and community levels.

To elaborate the existing knowledge about socio-cultural barriers, this research addresses two questions:

- RQ1: How have researchers conceptualized the features of socio-cultural barriers to information seeking?
- RQ2: In which ways have researchers characterized the impact of such barriers on information seeking?

3. Procedures

To investigate the research questions, a considerable number of studies, both conceptual and empirical investigations, were examined by means of conceptual analysis. Research material was identified by searching databases such as LISA and EBSCO. Keywords used in the literature search included barrier, constraint, limit, obstacle, social, cultural, information seeking, and information searching. In addition, the review articles on information needs, seeking, and use published in the volumes of the *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* were scrutinized. The search yielded about 90 potentially relevant documents published since the 1970s. Of these, 55 articles, conference papers, and books explicitly discussing the socio-cultural barriers to information seeking were selected for in-depth analysis. This sample appeared to be sufficient for the purposes of conceptual analysis, because the review of additional documents did not add nuance to the results, and the categories became saturated enough (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 343). The studies chosen for analysis ranged from general level conceptualizations (e.g., Wilson, 1981) to empirical investigations characterizing socio-cultural barriers in diverse contexts such as work task performance (e.g., Reddy & Spence, 2008) and health (e.g., Yi, Stvilia, & Mon, 2012). The majority of these investigations have been published in the forums of library and information science, but the research material also includes articles from other fields, such as health communication, nursing science, and youth studies.

The documents chosen for the analysis were scrutinized by means of conceptual analysis. Following Furner (2004), this method can be defined as an approach that treats concepts like socio-cultural barrier or sub-concepts such as institutional barrier as classes of objects, events, properties, or relationships. It involves defining the meaning of a given concept by identifying and specifying the contexts in which any entity or phenomenon is classified under the concept in question. More specifically, the documents were analyzed by devoting attention to how researchers have characterized

- the features of socio-cultural barriers as factors affecting the ways in which people access sources of information (for example, the attributes used to qualify institutional barriers)
- the ways in which socio-cultural barriers have an impact on information seeking (for example, the ways in which the paucity of social capital limits access to human sources).

Relevant text portions (paragraphs and sentences) focusing on the above issues were first identified. This material was then read several

times in order to identify individual characterizations or definitions of the main concept, that is, socio-cultural barriers. The texts chosen for analysis were then subjected to open coding to identify the sub-concepts describing the features of socio-cultural barriers. The codes were developed iteratively and inductively from a close reading of the research material. It appeared that in most studies the barriers were approached descriptively by characterizing the ways in which they hamper information seeking. The focus was thus placed on the features of socio-cultural constraints. Sometimes, researchers also referred to antecedents of barriers, e.g., restrictive norms characteristic of small-world communities (e.g., Chatman, 1992). Unfortunately, in these studies, the characterizations of the antecedents and features of barriers were lumped together so that it was not possible to differentiate them reliably. Therefore, these factors will be discussed together under the category of features. The conceptual analysis was based on the identification of similarities and differences between various characterizations of sub-concepts describing the features of barriers. Finally, the identified sub-concepts were named according to the data they contained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This resulted in the identification of six types of socio-cultural barriers. The analysis was continued by identifying ways in which the socio-cultural barriers of diverse types have an impact on information seeking.

The conceptual analysis was rendered more difficult due to the fact that researchers use varying terminology while referring to factors hampering information seeking. For example, Shenton (2007) prefers the term "information seeking problem" while referring to such factors. However, it appeared that information seeking problem is a term closely related to the construct of barrier because the former indicates how diverse factors inhibit an optimal process of information seeking. Therefore, information seeking problem was understood as synonymous with barrier. Some researchers (e.g., Attfield & Dowell, 2003) prefer the term "constraint." In the present study, the terms barrier and constraint are used synonymously, because the boundary between them tends to be elusive and they often refer to the same factors hampering information seeking in some way. Finally, Swigon (2011b, p. 366) introduces the term "information limits," defined as "obstacles hindering, delaying or preventing access to information, i.e. information seeking, searching and using." Again, on similar grounds, this term was understood as synonymous with barrier to information seeking.

To strengthen the focus of the study, a few barriers of particular kind were excluded from the analysis because of the paucity of relevant investigations. These barriers include, for example, racial discrimination (e.g., Warren, Kvasny, Burgess, Ahluwalia, & Okuyemi, 2010), and barriers arising from undocumented immigration (e.g., Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010, p. 517). Given the small number of such studies, this limitation does not endanger the validity of research findings. Finally, to sharpen the focus of the study, no attempt was made to examine the barriers specific to information use, that is, factors hampering the interpretation of information content available in sources obtained at hand (for these issues, see, for example, Houston & Westbrook, 2013).

4. Findings

The questions dealing with socio-cultural barriers are not new, and there are a number of investigations characterizing their features in diverse contexts of information seeking. Early contributions include Tom Wilson's (1981) framework identifying inter-personal constraints of information seeking. Since the 1990s, the picture of socio-cultural barriers has been enriched by new features such as restrictive social norms (Chatman, 1992) and lack of social capital (Johnson, 2007). Socio-cultural barriers to information seeking have been characterized in diverse contexts, for example, organizational decision making (Johnson, 1996, pp. 69–98), and they have been examined among various groups of people, for example, abused women (Harris & Dewdney, 1994) and international students (Mehra & Bilal, 2007).