Qualitative methodologies for determining the skills and competencies required of the hybrid information professional of the 21st century

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore qualitative methodologies appropriate to a research project investigating the boundaries and scope of the information profession, with specific reference to the skills/knowledge base and concepts of 'professionalism'. Reviewed here are social theory frameworks, focusing particularly on Structuration theory.

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Keywords: professionalism; professional identity; information profession; structuration theory; skills; competencies

1. Introduction

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Evaluated critically in this paper are qualitative methodologies underpinning a collaborative project being undertaken currently under the supervision of a project team from the British Library (BL) and the Department of Information Studies (DIS), Aberystwyth University. The topic for investigation is the boundaries and scope of the contemporary "information profession", specifically in relation to (1) the differing skills and competencies within the profession, including any differentiation between the individual domains in relation to the skills and knowledge base; and (2) concepts of professionalism, particularly in relation to categorisation of areas of "professional" expertise as opposed to "non-professional" work and skills (see Broady-Preston, 2009).

The BL is the national library of the United Kingdom, and is also a world-class research library. In March 2008, it became one of the founder members of the Library Archive and Information Science (LAIS) Research Coalition (Kenna, 2008), and is now "expanding its research activities in librarianship/information science and heritage", with this project emerging from the formation of its first Library and Information Science (LIS) research strategy. DIS, Aberystwyth, is the largest educator for the information profession in the UK in terms of student numbers, offering both campus-based full time degrees and postgraduate programmes, together with work-based undergraduate and postgraduate schemes via remote delivery, across the spectrum of librarianship, archive and museum studies (see *What our Department offers…*2009).

2. Definitions and context

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The British Library forms the case study for the research as the range and scope of its roles and services are such that in effect, it forms a microcosm of the information profession as a whole. By embedding a researcher within the organisation, and s/he observing and participating in all aspects of information related activity within the BL, a complex rich picture of information work and practice should be derived.

As Eisenhardt asserts, "whilst early identification of the research question is helpful, it is equally important to recognise that both are tentative in this type of research. Also, the research question may shift during the research" (Huberman and Miles, 2002, 11). Thus, a more focused research question will emerge as the research develops.

Explored below is a conceptual model for the research, the focus being on an appropriate methodological framework, as opposed to a delineation and discussion of empirical methods. The terms "methodologies" and "methods" are often employed synonymously in the literature; however, the definition of the term 'methodology' as "a system of methods used in a particular field" (*Compact…*2009) is one which will inform the discussion in this paper.

3. Drivers for change in the Information Profession
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As outlined in earlier papers (see Broady-Preston, 2007, Broady-Preston and Preston, 2007) there are a number of identifiable drivers for change in relation to the information profession, both sector specific and in relation to more generic developments within the national and international context vis-à-vis workforce development, employability, concepts of professionalism, skills and competencies. There is widespread evidence of technological developments such as social networking tools driving not only the acquisition of differing skills within the IP, but also causing professional boundaries to become blurred or more diffuse, with notable figures such as Natalie Ceeney, CEO of the National Archives (TNA) and Head of the UK Knowledge Council, calling for their demolition (Broady-Preston, 2009; Hyams, 2008).Moreover, it is not merely subject domain boundaries which are blurring within the IP, but also the traditional "hard" boundaries between professional level skills and what are often termed 'paraprofessional' skills. This process of restratification, and possible inter-professional conflict between strata, are key themes in professional identity studies of the previous decade or so (see for example, Freidson, 1994, Nancarrow and Borthwick, 2005).

Traditional professional boundaries are challenged not only by recent technological developments, but also by the adoption of more generic competency based frameworks for vocational education and training, as opposed to those specific to a sector or profession (see Broady-Preston, 2009) Generic competencies which relate to expected levels of individual performance in specified areas are used to define behaviours that the employer values, recognises and will, in many instances, reward positively (ibid.)

4. Professionalism and professional identity
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All the above developments represent significant challenges to our received understanding of concepts of professionalism and professional identity. Commentators such as Larson (1977) and Freidson (1994) define the process of professionalisation as one whereby professionals attempt to create and control a market for their professional expertise, including expert skills and knowledge, in order to secure a privileged social and economic position. The means by which such 'market dominance' is achieved by a professional group is through control over expert knowledge via a delineation of a body of professional knowledge to differentiate itself from competing occupational groups (Abbott,

1995; McDonald, 1999). Established mechanisms for ensuring continued success as a profession include the maintenance of control over access to education, training and the professional labour market, by establishing professional accreditation systems and prescribing career paths (Daniels and Johansen, 1985).

More recently, studies have focussed on the future of professions, most notably within the context of widespread, significant change, with some predicting a terminal decline in traditional professional influence, allied to the deskilling of professional work and the impact of managerial interventions, most notably in the public sector (see, for example, Coburn et al, 1997; Forrester, 2000).

5. Structuration Theory (ST)
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Given the contemporary debate vis-à-vis professional boundaries outlined above, sociological studies in relation to the role and function of professional boundaries resonate profoundly. A process of exploration, renewal or rejection of new knowledge acts to "reconstitute boundaries along which professions can build new strategies of legitimisation" and remake themselves (Fournier, 2000, 82).

In a seminal paper, Hotho (2008) explores a situated understanding of how professions reconstitute themselves through a discussion of the recursive relationship between the identity of a profession and the professional identity of individuals in the context of change. Using general medical practitioners (GPs) in Scotland as a case study, she uses ST and social identity theory (SIT) to underpin an exploration of the evolution and development of professions and professional identity within a change context.

Structuration theory, originally developed by Giddens (1984) and later developed by (1) Desanctis and Poole (1994), as Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST), and (2) Stones (2005) as Strong Structuration Theory (SST) (see below), may be categorised implicitly as a theory of change and conflict. ST and its later derivations are formal social theories, concerned with the evolution of groups and organizations. Defined simply, ST is an attempt to reconceptualise both functionalism, with its emphasis on structure and constraint togethr with the phenomenological/hermeneutic tradition emphasising the individual (or 'actor'), into a mutually dependent duality (Rose, 1999).

AST examines the interaction of groups and organisations with information technology (IT), being critical of the technocentric view of IT usage/ deployment, and with an emphasis on the social aspects. Thus, groups engaging dynamically with IT in an organisational setting create perceptions with regard to the role of such technologies, and how these may be applied to their activities. As such perceptions influence the way in which IT is employed, this mediates its impact on group outcomes.

6. Strong Structuration Theory (SST)
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There have been criticisms of Giddens' original theory in terms firstly, of complexity resulting in its overly-selective use (Whittington, 1992); secondly, underdevelopment with regard to the central thesis of 'duality' (Parker, 2000); and, arguably of greater concern in this context, in relation to its applicability to

empirical research (outlined in Stones, 1996). Based on a more recent reworking by Stones (2005)of structuration as Strong Structuration Theory (SST), Jack and Kholeif challenge "the belief held by certain critics that [ST] cannot be used in substantive empirical research, but is only a sensitivity device or analytical tool" (2007, 208).

As explained by Jack and Kholeif, Stones (2005) expounds a "stronger" or reinforced view of ST, to enable "substantive empirical research to be developed using the theory" (2007, 214). Moving from 'ontology-in-general' to 'ontology-in-situ' and the 'ontic', Stones enables structure and action to be observed in everyday occurrences, encompassing the why, what and wherefore, as opposed to a more abstract contemplation, and including an understanding of the actions of agents (2005, 75). Developing the concept of a 'sliding scale' as a mechanism for contextualising research, SST enables researchers to position their studies on a scale from in-depth investigations of the individual to the more abstract contemplation of global phenomena, including a consideration of Cohen's (1989) 'position-practices' (Stones, 2005).

The concept of position-practice is once again of discernable relevance here. Cohen (1989) argued that Giddens' original thesis, whilst employing the term 'social positions' to encompass identity, prerogatives and obligations on the part of individuals, with specific roles in organisations, such as Chief Executive Officer (CEO), forming a subset of such social positions, he nonetheless failed to explain satisfactorily how these were reproduced in the duality of structure. Thus, Cohen argues against the concept that organisational positions should be viewed as 'slots' into which individuals are placed, as this ignores the capability of individuals to modify, adapt and, in some instances abandon, their assigned roles (1989, 209). Rather, he argues that in referring to a CEO we are not referring to a positional identity alone, "but also to a set of structured practices which position-incumbents can and do perform" whether or not they act as is expected of them (Cohen, 1989, 210). Thus, conceptually this becomes transferable to the study of professionals and the professional context.

Further support is lent to the contextual validity of this conceptual model by Gorman and Clayton, who assert that "information agencies are service organizations involving social realities and individuals who work within those realities; they are places rich in meaning created by these individuals, and in which group and individual behaviour is an important factor" (2005,16). Moreover, ST has been employed previously as an analytical framework within information studies in White's 1990 study of organisational conflict in library organisations (White, 1990). Of significant interest here is that a key theme of his thesis is an exploration of inter-strata conflict arising from differing perceptions of the roles and relationships of what are designated as 'professional' and 'non-professional' staff within the library organisation (White, 1990).

7. SIT (Social Identity Theory)
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As indicated above, Hotho (2008) does not merely advocate the adoption and employment of ST in explorations of professional identity and change, but rather a fusion of ST with SIT. SIT (or identification theory) is defined minimally by Jenkins as "the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities"

(2004, 5). More colloquially, he also explains identity as "our understanding of who we are and of who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us)" (Jenkins, 2004, 5). Thus the relevance of SIT in this context becomes apparent. Professional identity is one of a range of social identities held by individuals; moreover, there is a strong and acknowledged social dimension to all professional groups (see Abbott, 1995; Ferlie et al, 2005). However, somewhat disappointingly, Hotho (2008) makes no reference to SST or indeed, AST in her determination of the relationship of the collective level of the profession and the individual level of the professional.

8. Alternative interpretivist paradigms
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Apparent from the discussion above is that any exploration of the contemporary nature of IP from both the collective and individual perspective must, self-evidently, be grounded in methodologies which address meaning, communication and therefore, language. As Black observes "the strength and power of the interpretivist approach lies in its ability to address the complexity and meaning of (consumption) situations" (2006, 319).

Thus arguably, studies such as ours might equally adopt action research as a a methodology. Acknowledging the work of Carr and Kemmis (1986), Vezzosi (2006) makes a persuasive case for the adoption of action research as a methodology, as it not only embraces change, but additionally, may be categorised as interventionist, involving the improvement of practice, the understanding of practice and the situation in which practice takes place.

Similarly, Brophy's explication of ethnography as a methodology which recognises that "that human behaviour in its social setting is immensely complicated and…tacit knowledge and hidden assumptions – including linguistic codes and language games-are of great importance"(2008,14) would appear to render it worthy of consideration. More especially, there are obvious connections between ethnography and Wittgenstein's Language Game, explored in earlier papers as a philosophical framework for Knowledge Management (KM) (Broady-Preston, 2005), and with discourse analysis (Frohmann, 1994).

Similarly, linked closely to the above, but from a differing perspective, one might equally argue the case for Grounded Theory, particularly with its emphasis on the "constant comparative method", participant involvement, and its grounding of theory formulation in empirical data, despite widely expressed criticisms of its applicability to social science and specifically library and information science research (see, for example, Selden, 2005).

9. Conclusions
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However, despite the seeming advantages of the alternative methodologies examined above, SST either singly or in combination with SIT, appears to offer a sound methodology to explore concepts of change, conflict and professional identity, from both the micro and macro perspective, especially where group boundaries are perceived as fluid or permeable. Moreover, given the remarks of Ceeney cited above, the following observation appears remarkably apposite, namely that "the use of ST has helped IT researchers…understand better how

technologies provide meaning, are used to exercise power and legitimize certain outcomes to the detriment of others, and how people produce or reproduce or enact organizational practices by using certain technological properties and not others" (Pozzobon and Pinnsonneault , 2005,1369). Finally, as Hotho concludes "studies that…explore how professionals read and interact with…change…and how change initiatives in turn serve as opportunities for professionals to re-enact, revise or reject the scripts of their profession must therefore, ultimately, be of interest and utility for…practice" (2008,737).

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