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Situating complexity: information behaviour in the contact zone

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Abstract

Introduction. This short paper addresses the problematic *un-situated* nature of the holistic framework proposed by Polkinghorne and Given. In 2021, Polkinghorne and Given called for a substantive shift in the information field to a holistic research paradigm. However, framing studies in a contextualised, complex manner has remained an enduring challenge, particularly regarding *where* information experiences occur.

Method. The author identifies a spatial gap in the holistic framework, traces existing literature on place/space in the information field, and explores M. L. Pratt's *contact zone* theory.

Analysis and results. The holistic paradigm holds an obfuscated view of place/space and its role in shaping information behaviour. Existing studies and theories that incorporate place/space and its impact on information practices underscore the importance of the spatial. The paper looks to contact zone theory as a useful tool for conceptualising information behaviour in particular sites.

Conclusion. This paper argues that *contact* and *zone* are both key aspects of information behaviour, as information *encounters* take place in specific *sites*, between diverse human and nonhuman agents with different levels of power and influence. The contact zone is suggested as a critical lens to examine spatially bound interactions that could offer a more anchored, multi-agentic vision for researching information behaviour.

Introduction

The field of information behaviour, which investigates ‘*people and how their lives intersect with the information world*’, has increasingly embraced notions of complexity and context (Given et al., 2023, p. 1). As research paradigms shifted away from a focus on systems and information seeking to social situations and practices, the field has continually reframed and expanded the vocabulary of information behaviour (Bates, 2018; Given et al., 2023). Theories such as small worlds (Chatman, 1991), information worlds (Burnett & Jaeger, 2011), information ecology (Davenport & Prusak, 1997), information grounds (Fisher and Naumer, 2006), information landscape (Lloyd, 2006), and information horizon (Sonnenwald, 2005) are built on understanding people’s information environments as a dynamic whole. More recently, Polkinghorne and Given have advocated for a full paradigm shift in the field away from mere holistic rhetoric to embrace holism in every step of the research process (Polkinghorne and Given, 2021). Yet framing information behaviour in a contextualised and complex manner has remained an enduring challenge for researchers, particularly regarding *where* experience occurs (Gibson and Kaplan, 2017; Nord, 2022). There is growing scholarly interest in embodied cognition, the corporeal, and the material and their relation to information behaviour (Cox, 2018; Lloyd, 2010; Lueg, 2015; Olsson et al., 2018; Olsson and Lloyd, 2017), which also informs Polkinghorne and Given’s holistic considerations. However, if we are to take the concept of embodiment, or ‘*being in place*’ (Olsson and Lloyd, 2017), seriously, then serious consideration must also be given to place/space, which constitutes an integral part of embodied information experience.

This short paper addresses the problematic *un-situated* nature of the holistic approach as proposed by Polkinghorne and Given by harnessing conceptual tools from within and beyond information science to situate complex information phenomena. The scope of their proposed holistic paradigm is broad, addressing paradigmatic, metatheoretical, and methodological issues in the field which

consequently limits its engagement with particular facets of context. This paper identifies a specific gap in Polkinghorne and Given’s holistic framework, reviews existing literature on place/space, and finally explains the contact zone (Pratt, 1991) as a conceptual lens from literary studies that engages with place/space critically. This paper argues that the contact zone’s combined emphasis on *contact*, or the continuous moments of encounter between diverse agents, and *zones*, or the grounded and particular conditions under which contact takes place, could enrich the holistic research paradigm by engaging with the role and impact of the spatial more explicitly.

Problem statement

Dervin and Nilan’s call to identify novel ways of studying users in situational contexts catalysed a proliferation of qualitative studies of users’ experiences and perspectives (Bates, 2018; Dervin & Nilan, 1986; Talja and Hartel, 2007). Models and theories acknowledge ‘*the complexity of context and the actor... embedded in complex, multiple, overlapping, and dynamic contexts*’ (Courtright, 2007, p. 291) but simultaneously recognise the difficulty of studying multidimensional information experience (Bawden and Robinson, 2015; Dervin, 1997; Nord, 2022; Talja et al., 1999).

Against this backdrop, Polkinghorne and Given posit that ‘*the term holistic is the longstanding struggle to recognize, understand, express, and explain complexity*’ (Polkinghorne and Given, 2021, p. 1262). Seizing the term, Polkinghorne and Given propose a full-fledged holistic research paradigm that is interpretivist, qualitative, and critical; it invites researchers to take an interest in ‘*whole*’ persons and their ‘*affective, embodied, relational*’ experiences in complex contexts shaped by culture, social norms, and social structures (Polkinghorne and Given, 2021, pp. 1266–1267). The holistic research design they advocate underplays one critical aspect: the site. The present paper was motivated by the need for a more robust consideration of place/space in the holistic paradigm, which it critically examines below, and stresses the need to explicitly engage with

place/space and its impact in order to represent information behaviour holistically.

The holistic paradigm

The holistic paradigm in information science was borne out of a reaction to ‘*the widespread atomization, mechanization, and reductionism*’ underpinning the broader research landscape (Polkinghorne and Given, 2021, p. 1262). Polkinghorne and Given’s holistic alternative ‘*advocate[s] for more expansive and inclusive*

ways of thinking about what is worthy of attention’ (Polkinghorne and Given, 2021, p. 1263), and proposes a framework that moves beyond simplistic, isolated models to embodied, socially situated, and contextualised inquiries of information-related phenomena.

But what does it mean to apply a holistic paradigm to information research? Polkinghorne and Given present researchers with a methodological programme for conducting holistic research (Table 1).

Research design stages	Means and practices of holistic research design
Identifying the research problem	Focus on whole people rather than fragments of people or experiences Explicit or implicit acknowledgment that structures and systems exist and have qualities beyond those of individuals
Articulating research questions	Focus on articulating experience (i.e., an expansive approach), rather than measure (i.e., a reductive approach)
Selecting methodology and methods	Choose methodology and methods that enable connections between individual experience and larger context
Collecting and/or generating data	Maintain sensitivity to social structures and institutions, even when also focusing on individual experience
Analyzing data	Acknowledge the researcher’s subjectivity Focus on expressing complexity
Representing and sharing results	Findings are richly described and contextualized

Table 1. Excerpt from table ‘*Characteristics of holistic research design*’ (Polkinghorne and Given, 2021, p. 1267)

They focus here on trying to capture people's subjectivity in full and their experiences in context. However, the holistic research design they propose underemphasises the tangible and specific sites in which experiences are embedded and their impact. As indicated in Table 1, it frames context in primarily social and structural ('social structures and institutions', 'structures and systems') or broad ('larger context') terms that do not explicitly engage with the specific qualities of the spatial environment in which information behaviour takes place, be it physical or virtual. Institutions and social structures can refer to particular settings, but they can also broadly describe legal, economic, and cultural systems, and may include both micro- and macro-scale relations, obscuring the actual locations where day-to-day interactions occur.

Another key premise of Polkinghorne and Given's holistic approach is that agency does not belong solely to people, but also resides in social norms, structures, and cultures. This opens the door to acknowledging place/space not just as an invisible, immaterial element in the background that is secondary to social arrangements but as another entity with distinct characteristics; one with a kind of agency that enables or hinders specific modes of interaction. This resonates with Huizinga and Cavanagh's practice theory, which factors in nonhuman agency and the social role of objects (Huizinga and Cavanagh, 2011), as well as the concept of socio-technical interaction networks (STIN) where people, technologies, artefacts, and practices are seen as co-constitutive and highly intertwined (Kling et al., 2003; Talja and Hansen, 2006). Anchoring information-related phenomena in specific sites, whether physical, virtual, or figurative, and seeing the social and spatial as inextricably interwoven could help reveal grounded, localised connections, and show how the site shapes, and is in turn shaped by, information behaviour.

Place/space in information behaviour

Certainly, the importance of place/space has not escaped scholars in the information field.

Savolainen surveyed around 100 sources on information seeking that touched on spatial issues, noting the growing prominence of space as a factor of context (Savolainen, 2006), although others have criticised a general aversion in the field to explicitly considering place as being of primary importance (Gibson and Kaplan, 2017).

Notwithstanding, recent studies of place/space have examined how, for example, the home environment plays a role in information creation (Lee and Ocepek, 2022); mobile work environments and information practices shape each other (Jarrahi and Thomson, 2017); the information literacy of refugees develops in everyday spaces (Lloyd and Wilkinson, 2016, 2019); place influences the information needs and access of parents of individuals with disabilities (Gibson and Kaplan, 2017); and physical and virtual social spaces constitute key information sharing sites for immigrants (Khoir et al., 2015). These studies indicate how overt attention to place/space can contribute to a holistic picture of information practices.

Theories such as small worlds and information grounds also acknowledge the importance of place/space in fostering or delimiting information behaviour. Small worlds refer to communities of a particular social milieu with shared worldviews that inhabit a narrow, socially regulated information sphere (Chatman, 1991, 1999). Although not their dominant feature, Chatman does note that small worlds are based on shared physical and/or conceptual spaces which delineate the possibilities of thought and action (Chatman, 2000). An information ground is an environment that materialises momentarily as people who gather for a particular task exchange knowledge spontaneously (Pettigrew, 1999, 2000). Places such as community clinics were found to be rich grounds for informal information sharing between the elderly and nurses, and the concept highlighted the entangled roles of the physical, social, and temporal dimensions in enabling information behaviour (Fisher and Naumer, 2006). Again, these theories emphasise how specific, localised, and material contexts can enrich our understanding of information behaviour.

Contact zone

A term that may help conceptualise interactions in particular sites is the *contact zone*, first introduced by literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt (Pratt, 1991). Pratt defines contact zones as 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power' (Pratt, 1991, p. 34). A contact zone designates a spatially and temporally bounded site of cultural encounters which opens the possibilities of mutual exchange, negotiation, and co-production, even in the face of structural inequality and conflict. The process of creative negotiation in the contact zone is called *transculturation*, whereby subordinate groups 'select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture' and 'determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for' (Pratt, 1991, p. 36), ultimately producing new cultural forms. Unlike modes of cultural contact such as acculturation and assimilation which are linear, binary, one-directional, and draw firm borders around different cultures, boundaries are porous in a contact zone. *Transcultural* encounters in the contact zone offer the possibility of multiple, layered, multidirectional exchanges in a specific site, which may be physical, but also literary or conceptual.

One of Pratt's examples of a physical and literary contact zone includes a classroom where the lecturer and students grapple with legacies of oppression in their curriculum. Pratt describes teaching a course designed to include intersecting cultural histories of the Americas through texts that had specific historical ties to students in the class (Pratt, 1991, p. 39). The lecturer did not present a unified narrative of the world to the students. Instead, students grappled with historical texts that discussed their cultural roots in glorified or objectified ways and confronted others' perspectives, including their ignorance or misunderstanding, in class. Pratt recalls how difficult yet stimulating the course was, as students faced troubling historical legacies, others' perceptions of them, and their own biases. This led to moments of anger and pain but also of

'wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom' as lecturers and students, their cultural backgrounds, their views and ideas, and particular historical texts met and became entangled in the contact zone of a North American classroom (Pratt, 1991, p. 39).

Information behaviour in a contact zone bears similarities with Pratt's classroom: in it, people are making sense of the world as they encounter each other and their information environments in particular sites, finding ways to navigate a possibly hierarchical and deeply biased place/space with established norms and structures. Information behaviour is formed in the process of negotiating between many different human and nonhuman agents including place/space; it is an embedded, enmeshed phenomenon that fluctuates as people, systems, technologies, objects, cultures, institutions, and spaces engage with one other in diverse yet specific ways. Individuals and groups may be subject to radically unequal or biased cultural, institutional, structural, or commercial pressures when navigating physical and virtual information environments, but their information behaviour can still be based on multidirectional exchanges.

Pratt's contact zone is limited in that it predates today's networked era and therefore does not mention virtual spaces, based rather on the literary encounters and spaces from which the theory arises. Nevertheless, its emphasis on space and instances of interaction, struggle, and co-production between agents therein offers a focussed and complex approach to the study of information experience, which is anchored in physical or virtual sites.

Ultimately, people creatively adopt, adapt, produce, reject, and avoid information as they engage with and in specific sites, reshaping and co-producing information conditions on the ground. Thus, understanding these interactions in their full complexity necessitates properly incorporating place/space within a holistic framework, across every step of the research design, from the outset. For example, in the first step of the holistic research design, where researchers are encouraged to *'[acknowledge] that structures and systems exist and have*

qualities' (Polkinghorne and Given, 2021, p. 1267), researchers should not lose sight of the affordances and characteristics of specific sites which shape social structures and systems. When collecting data, researchers seeking to 'maintain sensitivity to social structures and institutions' (Polkinghorne and Given, 2021, p. 1267) may want to consider how places/spaces connect structures and institutions to the individual.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the holistic paradigm and existing literature on place/space and suggested the *contact zone* from literary and cultural studies as a useful conceptual tool to situate information behaviour research. Viewing information phenomena through the lens of the contact zone allows the researcher to operate in a way that is at once narrow and complex, within a broader holistic framework. Researchers may utilise the contact zone as a heuristic tool that cuts across the entire holistic research design and offers a concrete, spatial anchor that complements Polkinghorne and Given's metatheoretical framework. Research using this approach can enhance explanatory power by bringing to light how place/space is shaping and is shaped by site-bound interactions and particular spatio-temporal tensions. A transcultural contact zone approach would view information behaviour as embedded and situated, and simultaneously as

porous and non-neutral, 'constituted through transformations and entanglements that follow from contacts and relationships between various agents, concepts and institutions' (Michaels and Mittler, 2019, p. 44).

Ultimately, this paper argues that *contact* is a key aspect of information behaviour and that *zone* is equally as important, as information encounters take place in specific sites of friction, between diverse human and nonhuman (technological, institutional, commercial, cultural, material) agents with different levels of power and influence. Crucially, places/spaces also have their own characteristics and form of agency and are continuously, mutually transformed through a myriad of interactions. Thus, the spatial and the social are each indispensable to fully understanding the other. Based on these arguments, the contact zone can serve as a critical lens to examine spatially bound sites of encounter and interaction, and offer a more anchored, multi-agentic vision for researching information behaviour.

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