

Chapter 1. Introduction

“We humans are biased observers, with a vested interest in the answer. The cure for this disease is more data.” --Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors: A Search for Who We Are* (1992: 400)

1.1 Overview

This chapter will explain a) the research question, overall aim, and four objectives of the thesis, b) the structure of the thesis, c) the background of this study, and c) relevance of this research project.

The next section explains the research problem, aims, and objectives.

1.2 The research problem, aim, and objectives

1.2.1 The research question

The research question of this thesis was:

What are the community information needs and provision of the residents of the Broomhall neighbourhood of Sheffield, UK according to their perceptions?

1.2.2 The overall aim

The overall aim of this thesis was:

To analyse, through the application of a community profiling tool, the community information needs of the residents of the Broomhall neighbourhood of Sheffield, UK, and to evaluate to what extent information providers meet those needs.

1.2.3 Objectives of the thesis

This section explains the four specific research objectives that have been established to conduct this study and investigate the thesis research question and its overall aim. It also mentions the chapters where these objectives are analysed. These are the objectives:

- 1) To identify the community information needs of the residents of the Broomhall neighbourhood. This objective is analysed in the Chapter 5 (Analysis and discussion of the findings: perceptions of the issues and features of Broomhall, information needs, and provision).
- 2) To establish to what extent information providers satisfy the community information needs of the residents of the Broomhall neighbourhood. This objective is also analysed in the Chapter 5.
- 3) To explore the effectiveness of the community profiling tool to analyse community information needs and provision. This objective is analysed in the Chapter 3 (Review of the literature).
- 4) To understand the possible implications of this study for policy makers. This objective is analysed in the Chapter 6 (Conclusions and recommendations).

The next section explains the overall structure of the thesis.

1.3 The structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured into seven chapters. The present Chapter 1 forms the introduction to the thesis.

Chapter 2, "Methodology," analyses the research design to generate, analyse, and report this thesis. This employs qualitative research methodology, particularly interpretivism or interpretivist approaches and methods of analysis of documents, observation and interviews (individual and in focus groups).

Chapter 3 presents a literature review about the three key elements of this project: *the community profiling tool, community information needs, and information providers.*

Chapter 4 presents a general historical and demographical background of the Broomhall neighbourhood, going as far as the 16th century until the year 2006, when the generation of data for this project ended.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis, and discussions of the major findings of the project. These findings are grouped in six major issues and two major features that emerged from the Broomhall neighbourhood.

These are the issues found:

- 1) Issues of territoriality or uses of the land (e.g. housing; expansion of Sheffield and Hallam universities becoming university student villages);
- 2) Issues of poverty, social and economic inequalities (e.g. unemployment, debt, crime);
- 3) Health issues (e.g. drug addiction, lack of: green public open space, playgrounds, and sports and leisure facilities);
- 4) Political issues;
- 5) Cultural issues (e.g. multicultural, ethnic, religious, and national issues);
- 6) Communication issues.

These are the features found:

- 7) Transport features;
- 8) Educational features.

Those six issues and two features, at the same time, have been considered as the eight major community information needs as perceived by the residents of Broomhall and the information providers acting upon them. Hence, this chapter also analyses and discusses the interrelationships of those issues, features, and information needs, with the various ways that information providers tried to meet them.

Chapter 6, "Conclusions and recommendations," summarizes the major contributions to knowledge emerging from this thesis in this thesis, and the main conclusions and recommendations for: a) the Broomhall residents; b) LIS practitioners, and c) policy makers.

Chapter 7, presents the broad recommendations for further research that emerged from this project. These are some of the themes for further research that the author might follow (e.g. the creation of an *integral analytical model for Library and Information Science*; informal information networks of people who act like gateways to information; possible information provision of the unsolicited post people receive through their letterboxes; issues on the privatization of information provision in publicly funded institutions).

The next section explains the background of this thesis.

1.4 Background to the study

These sections will give an overview of the background to this study.

1.4.1 Rationale for conducting research on Broomhall and how this doctoral research project was configured

Unlike McGuire (1981), who conducted a community profiling research project in a middle class affluent neighbourhood of Sheffield, the author of this project thought from the outset to choose a deprived neighbourhood to do research about it. In the recent research, *Closing the Gap: a Framework for Neighbourhood Renewal in Sheffield*, it was shown that Sheffield has some of the most deprived Wards in England. Of the 29 wards Sheffield comprises, 10 of them are in the list of the top ten percent most deprived wards in England. Seven of these 10 are in the top five percent, and three are in the top one percent. Sheffield's poorest wards have more deprivation than those of Leeds, whilst being less deprived than those of Liverpool or Manchester. However, by contrast, Sheffield has some of the most affluent areas in England and Broomhall area is the number 10 most deprived neighbourhood according to Milne (2004: 5).

This research project began formally on the 30th of September 2003 when the researcher registered at the Department of Information Studies at the University of Sheffield. Originally the researcher's research problem was to find out about "some barriers such as economic, political, social, legal, cultural and others which hampered the free access to information resources in public libraries" with a global scope. Following the guidance of his first supervisor, he began reviewing the literature so as to narrow down and focus better his research problem, since it was far too ambitious. In doing so, by October 2003 he came across a tool of research called "community analysis" as employed in a community of Denver, Colorado in the USA in order to build a public library according to a "community analysis" of the actual information needs from the people in the community (Sarling and Van Tassel, 1999).

This idea attracted the researcher's interest, since part of conducting the PhD research project, as a Mexican student, was to learn methodologies to implement them to the Mexican LIS scenarios. When the researcher discussed it with his supervisor, he was told that it was a good idea to refocus the research proposal. In addition, the supervisor commented that in the British librarianship the U.S. "community analysis" concept was known as "community profiling." Moreover, the supervisor suggested to him to review the work of Beal (1985),

Community Profiling for Librarians, who was a *community profiling* expert. The supervisor also suggested to him to review further the literature in the database of the Department of Information Studies at the University of Sheffield, because different LIS researchers and practitioners had already extensively conducted *community profiling* research for different LIS scenarios in that department for more than 30 years (e.g. Beal, 1976, 1979, 1985; Stone, 1985; Usherwood, 1992; 2003; Linley and Usherwood, 1998); with additional research by some postgraduate students from the same department (e.g. Curtis, 1972; Miller, 1977; Hall, 1981; McGuire, 1981; Hunter, 1998; Li, 1999; Ewart, 2004).

The author of this project began to be interested in the *community profiling* tool as a process to narrow down his initial doctoral research topic. In 17 November 2003 the author wrote the paper “An introduction to the applicability of qualitative research methodologies to the field of Library and Information Sciences” as an exploratory way to narrow down his doctoral research topic (Muela-Meza, 2003a); eventually this paper was published in a Peruvian peer review journal (Muela-Meza, 2006b).

Subsequently, an interesting article from the USA by Sarling and Van Tassel (1999): “Community analysis: research that matters to a North-Central Denver community,” came to the knowledge of the author. The author as a Mexican grantee of the Mexican National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) ¹ has as his overall aims to learn in the UK as a visiting scholar as many theories, methodologies, methods, and tools which could be implemented in Mexico according to the Mexican reality. Thus, the first impression from that paper was that *community analysis* was a tool that could matter to Mexico’s reality. As far as the author knew, most LIS professionals were already aware of the classic librarianship conceptualization of *community of users’ needs*. Librarians and other documental information professionals and practitioners need to be aware of this concept in order to effectively provide information services to any user community, any library or other documental information institution.

The author acknowledges that he had not been previously engaged in a major research project that required a knowledge of which theories, methodologies, methods, and tools would best help to fulfil that LIS “mantra” of satisfying all Mexican communities’ information needs, issues, and problems. This is due to the fact that when he joined the Department of Information Studies at the University of Sheffield, he was more interested in *information access barriers* in public libraries, not in *information needs*. However, before October 2003 he had made several literature reviews on public libraries since 1995 (Muela-Meza, 1995; 2001a; 2001b; 2002b; 2003b); on *freedom of information access* to global and Mexican governments (2001c; 2002a; 2004a); on *reference services* in academic libraries, including a brief review (1999a; 1999b; 1999c).

Furthermore, this flexible change of focus at the beginning of this project shows the reflexivity and open mindedness adopted throughout the whole thesis by the author. When he came to the UK he came with some previous ideas, his and others’, through a study of the literature. Thus, the idea of conducting empirical

¹ <http://www.conacyt.mx/>

research on any LIS phenomenon which may help solve library and information problems in Mexico was a very exciting endeavour for the researcher to take.

Thus, at that time and in that context, when the author became aware of the *community analysis* term and all the immense reach it involved, he saw it as a candle in a sort of darkness (to paraphrase Sagan's book: *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (1997)), because in those early days of this doctorate, the idea of narrowing the original "global" study the author had in mind was such a pressing task that at times it looked rather dark, fuzzy and blurred. When the author presented his paper (Muela-Meza, 2003a) to his first supervisor, and talked with him about *community analysis* as implemented by Sarling and Van Tassel (1999) the supervisor suggested to him that it was a very doable research project, but suggested to him a very slightly different term to use instead of *community analysis*, namely *community profiling*.

The phrase "*community profiling*" was not alien to the researcher. In LIS parlance, it is not alien either. In the Mexican LIS tradition where he obtained his B.A. degree in librarianship at the Nuevo Leon Autonomous University (UANL) since 1995 he already was aware of the concept of *community of users' profile* in any given library (as in Rendón Rojas, 2005: 116-117, or researched by many other Mexican LIS commentators even from earlier times as far back as the end of the 19th century (Sametz de Walerstein, 1991). In addition, while he was head of the Reference Section of the Central Library at the Ciudad Juarez Autonomous University (UACJ) in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico, he built the first university-wide Profile of the Users' Community of the Reference Services at UACJ, which was described in a small paper at the UACJ university newspaper (Muela-Meza, 1999a; 1999b; 1999c).

However, the novelty, at least for the author, of *community analysis*, or *community profiling*, came twofold. On one hand, it came as an opportunity to research any community in terms of its collectiveness (collective group) or as a collectiveness of people belonging, living, working, etcetera in a geographically delimited area. This idea was very attractive as a research topic because most of the LIS tradition has focused mostly on individuals, on an individual basis, not collectively.

On the other hand, it could be foreseen at the earliest stages of this project that *community analysis*, or *community profiling* could be researched for the sake of research itself applied on any community without having the necessity to do research by measuring its results against the aims, or objectives of any library, or any other documental information institution, as had been the tradition of library research since immemorial times, and more particularly since the advent of positivism applied to LIS.

Thus, these ideas of breaking up with some "well established" traditions in LIS and the potential of contributing something new to the universal commons of knowledge through empirical research were very exciting ideas. However, they also represented a great challenge, regardless of how small or big the eventual sample would be of people or geographical boundaries.

The next section will explain the relevant features that make this thesis distinctive within the library and information science (LIS) field.

1.5 Relevance of this doctoral research project

This is an overview of the features where this doctoral project might have a distinctive impact in the LIS field both: theoretically and methodologically:

- Whereas most of the LIS studies on *community profiling* have focused on the information needs of some particular groups of people, this study has also tried to analyse, in relation to the people included in the sample, their physical environment, where they live, work, study, etc.
- Whereas most of the LIS studies on *community profiling* have focused mainly on the information needs of individuals on an individual basis, this study has focused on *community information needs*, that is, by approaching the phenomenon as a collective phenomenon, not of standalone and isolated individuals; *community profiling* is about communities, not individual profiling.
- Whereas most of the studies have mainly profiled the communities in order to provide information services from existing or future libraries, this project has gone beyond that through several paths such as: discovering relationships among the people – the needs and issues affecting them in their material or immaterial context but materialistically determined – and their information providers; researching mainly for academic purposes to test the *community profiling* tool. If the project had informed any particular library, documental information institution, local or central government institution, agency, public policy, and so on, that would have been only done tangentially and only as a result of the overall thesis.
- Whereas most of the previous LIS studies on *community analysis*, or *community profiling* have relied mainly on quantitative research methodologies and methods, and some even applied positivism apparently in strict ways, this project has relied almost entirely on qualitative research methodologies and methods applied open-mindedly with flexibility, and reflexivity as to test their effectiveness when combined with *community profiling*.

The next section gives a summary of the introductory chapter of this thesis.

1.6 Summary

This chapter has presented a general overview of the thesis. It comprised these sections: a) the research question, overall aim, and four objectives of the thesis, b) the structure of the thesis, c) the background of this study, and c) relevance of this research project.

The research question, aim, and objectives have presented deductively the overall purpose of this research project, that is, going from the general (e.g. research question) to the particular (e.g. aim, and then objectives). Consequently, from the research question the aim was derived, and from this the objectives. Hence, the research question gives a synoptic view of the purpose of this study encompassing its key elements: an analysis of information needs from the perceptions of residents who are bonded as a community, and

who live in a neighbourhood (Broomhall), located in Sheffield, UK, and an evaluation of the information provision they receive to meet their needs. The term *perceptions* implies that this is a study that employs qualitative research methodology.

The overall aim of this study operationalizes the research question as a clear affirmative statement of how, in general terms, this question is going to be responded to, throughout the study. The key elements mentioned in the research question remained, and another was added: the application of the *community profiling tool*. Hence, it is via the *community profiling tool* that the research question will be addressed, and how the study will be conducted (as a response to its overall purpose).

Hence, this overall aim is operationalized through four objectives. The first three comprise an analysis of the key elements of the overall aim: a) community information needs of these residents, b) information provided to meet these needs, and c) the effectiveness of the community profiling tool that was employed to analyse the first two objectives. The fourth objective was established to assess the possible implications of this study for policy makers.

The thesis was structured into seven chapters: Chapter 1, Introduction, Chapter 2, Methodology, Chapter 3, Review of the literature, Chapter 4, Historical and demographic background of the Broomhall neighbourhood, Chapter 5, Analysis and discussion of findings, Chapter 6, Conclusions and recommendations, and Chapter 7, Further research.

In the section of the background of the study was explained the rationale for conducting research on Broomhall and how this doctoral research project was configured. This background explained how the author began to be interested in employing the *community profiling tool*, in the qualitative research methodology, and how the Broomhall neighbourhood was selected to conduct this study.

In the section of the relevance of this doctoral research project, an overview was provided of the features that this study might have in terms of providing a distinctive impact for library and information science. Four features have made this study distinct from others: a) the application of the community profiling has focused not only on information needs of some groups, as other studies, but also on their physical environment, b) the application of the community profiling has focused on information needs of the community, on a collective basis, not individually as other studies, c) the application of community profiling in this study has been conducted for academic purposes for the sake of knowledge, not as other studies conducted for specific libraries or organisations.

Chapter 2 will explain the methodology employed in this project.