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Insiders and Outsiders: an Exploration of the Influence of Social Type on Information Behavior

The study of information behavior within the field of library and information science in the past several decades has undergone a major shift from focusing on systems to focusing on the users of those systems. Citing a review by Zweizig and Dervin, Harris and Dewdney note that from the period 1949 to 1975, only 16 studies designated users as the unit of analysis rather than system-defined measures of use; by 1986, however, Dervin and Nilan "suggested that researchers were becoming more aware of the need for user-centered research" (Harris and Dewdney 1994, p. 9). A frequent theme invoked by various researchers to explain this shift is the need to keep informational services relevant to as wide an audience as possible. Fidel notes that "the more the system fits a user's needs and seeking and searching behavior, the more likely is the user to find useful information." He postulates that user needs have always been important but that advances in computer technology have been instrumental in this shift, both by allowing users to bypass traditional systems like libraries and also making possible a greater adaptability of system design to user needs (Fidel 2000, p. 81). Wilson, a researcher widely cited to have been inspirational in this shift from system to user, agrees that the potential marginality of library services is "addressed by a more truly user-oriented, innovative, experimental information profession" (Wilson 1981, p.8). In addition, Harris and Dewdney suggest that often the very populations information systems have been designed to serve are the populations that need the system's services most; this leads them to state:

"Clearly, then, if we wish to understand the extent to which human-services agencies can appropriately intervene in problematic situations, it is imperative to study the situations, and the expectations they have for information that will help them progress through these situations toward their goals." (Harris and Dewdney 1994, p. 21)

One consequence of this shift has been to examine in greater depth the role of contextual and situational factors influencing the information behavior of users, and to do so in conceptual frameworks that are increasingly holistic in their scope; the more holistic the framework, the greater the capacity of that framework to account for information behavior in all aspects of human life. Out of these many possible contextual/situational factors, many researchers have identified social context in particular as having a profound impact on a person's information behavior. Wilson's models of information behavior were among the first in the field to recognize the importance of contexts, and in particular, social contexts; in his words, "If…the full range of human, personal needs is at the root of motivation towards information-seeking behavior, it must also be recognized that these needs arise out of the role an individual fills in social life" (Wilson 1981, p. 7). Other researchers that have since studied the role of social context in information behavior include Reijo Savolainen with Everyday Life Information Seeking, Brenda Dervin with Sense-Making Methodology, and Elfreda Chatman with her theories of information poverty and life in the round. Recognizing the profound impact that social context can have on information behavior has often led them to borrow heavily from sociological perspectives of knowledge and information for conceptual points of departure. Elfreda Chatman in particular has done extensive research on the influence of

social contexts on information behavior. In her articles *The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders* and *A Theory of Life in the Round*, she draws on the concept of social roles or types of "insiders" and "outsiders" as discussed by the sociologist Robert K. Merton in 1972 in "A Chapter on the Sociology of Knowledge." In this paper, I will examine Chatman's conception of insiders and outsiders and its usefulness in describing or determining a variety of information behaviors. In so doing, I hope to engage the relevant theories/conceptual frameworks of Reijo Savolainen and Brenda Dervin as well.

Chatman begins her theory constructions by observing people living in "brutal, marginalized" worlds, such as the elderly, janitors, and other working poor populations. Seeking a way to "examine the needs of people who had yet to find a voice in the literature" (Chatman 1999, p. 207), she posits the necessity of understanding the potential relationship between social type and information behavior: "…but it seems that we should spend some time trying to explore what factors are essential to the creation of social types, why some people are willing to suspend a reality about themselves to be accepted in another reality." She finds that "social types provide clues as to ways in which to approach *the other,* influence one's ability to seek information, and are an essential condition in the mutual sharing of ideas" (Chatman 1999, p. 209). This mention of "*the other*" is typical of her focus on the social types of "insiders" and "outsiders." The concept of insiders and outsiders heavily influence her theories; in "The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders," she notes that, "…an examination of knowledge need and use is significantly influenced by our identification of insider or outsider" (Chatman 1996, p. 195). Chatman cites Merton as a major contributor to her conception of insiders/outsiders (Chatman, p. 194).

So who are insiders and outsiders? According to Merton in his work on the sociology of knowledge, "Insiders are the members of specified groups and collectivities or occupants of specified social statuses; Outsiders are the nonmembers" (Merton 1972, p. 21). In Chatman's work, these memberships have important consequences for information sharing and behavior. Insiders see themselves as having privileged access to certain kinds of information not available to outsiders, and they find it necessary to protect their status by keeping this information from outsiders "except at great risk and personal cost." This privileged access creates what she terms a "small worldview," which is maintained through secrecy and deception, due to the sense that "outsiders cannot comprehend a world different from their own." As a result, insiders avoid potentially useful information from outsiders, and significant informational barriers between insiders and outsiders are created (Chatman 1996, p. 194-195). She theorizes that this lack of trust insiders have for outsiders, and vice versa, leads to situations where important informational needs are not shared and thus met. This in turn is what leads to a condition of information poverty (Chatman 1996, p. 197). Despite their lack of insider/outsider terminology, these ideas are supported by other researchers. Harris and Dewdney state that studies in many disciplines repeatedly show that people facing a need for information usually consult internal resources first, people like themselves including friends and family (insiders) next, and institutions (outsiders) last (Harris and Dewdney 1994, p. 24).

Chatman later develops her notion of a "small worldview" into her theory of "Life in the Round" after studying a female prison population, where the "round" refers to this small world created by a community of insiders. Here she finds that "insiders" have the fundamental task of constructing "self" within the round. Having undertaken such a role,

they observe and control information flow in that community (Chatman 1999, p. 212).

She stresses the power of that community by noting that, "Community in its most

intrinsic sense is the most existential definition of who one is" (Chatman 1999, p. 211).

Although her concept of a community of insiders originates from studying marginal

populations, she becomes able to generalize it to all communities:

> "Community, then, explains the totality of my world, it also explains your world,
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> and it explains the world of prisoners. The essential characteristic of all these
>
> worlds is their smallness. Within the confines of our small worlds our personal
>
> existences are played out. In my world, my self is shaped by a worldview, which
>
> accepts certain ways in which to speak, behave, and accept or reject information."
>
> (Chatman 1999, p. 211)

This brings us to an important consideration; that the statuses of insiders and

outsiders can be interchangeable, fluid, and/or simultaneous. Chatman's marginalized

communities may see themselves as insiders, though society at large sees them as

outsiders, and vice versa. Intriguingly, she found that at times, some insiders viewed

other members of the same social community as outsiders as well (Chatman 1996, p.

205). Going back to Merton, he explains that,

> "In structural terms, we are all, of course, both Insiders and Outsiders, members
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> of some groups and, sometimes derivatively, not of others; occupants of certain
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> statuses which thereby exclude us from occupying other cognate
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> statuses…individuals have not a single status but a status set: a complement of
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> variously interrelated statuses which interact to affect both their behavior and
>
> perspectives...The array of status sets in a population means that aggregates of

individuals share some statuses and not others; or, to put this in context, that they

typically confront one another simultaneously as Insiders and Outsiders."

(Merton 1972, p. 22)

The notion of belonging to multiple statuses including the occupation of both

insider and outsider statuses lends a much richer depth to the concept of insiders and

outsiders. This depth will play an important role as we look at two other conceptual

frameworks relevant to the discussion.

These two other frameworks – Sense-Making from Brenda Dervin and Everyday

Life Information Seeking from Reijo Savolainen – while not specifically addressing

insider/outsider roles, have also looked at the influence of social context on information

behavior. Dervin's theoretical framework (or methodology, depending on your point of

view) of Sense-Making rests on the relationship between situations, gaps, and uses.

People "make sense" of their worlds by defining and bridging the gaps between their

situations and their uses (goals, helps, or outcomes). It is the situation and gap-definition

element of her equation that acknowledges contextual issues, as how a person views their

situation will determine how they define their gap and subsequently bridge (or do not

bridge) it. However, Dervin repeatedly stresses the importance of seeing any context as

surrounding not so much the general state of a person's existence as the person's

approach to an individual situation at a specific moment in time and space. In other

words, context is bound to the situation of the moment and the person's conception of

him or herself in that moment, but is not necessarily a static condition of that person

(Dervin 1992, p. 66). Dervin does acknowledge that the individual's world is greatly

defined by culture, history, and institutions, but maintains that the individual's

relationship to "them is always a matter of self-construction, no matter how non-individualistic the person or the time-space may seem." She focuses strongly on the action taken by the person in a given situation. Dervin feels that this viewpoint provides a much better understanding of the human capacity for the creative use of information in facing their various life circumstances (Dervin 1992, p. 67). This is in contrast to Chatman, whose framework stresses instead conditions that are continuous around a given population, and how those conditions influence behavior. Chatman addresses this difference in her approach from Sense-Making in the following passage:

"…this is a poverty life-world rather than a situational approach for several reasons. For one, although problems might begin on an individual level, for one's personal search strategies to have practical implications, they must be viewed within a frame of social norms. That is, making sense from a problematic situation is certainly worthwhile. To be truly interesting, this sense-making process should be viewed within our insiders/outsiders context. The value of this approach is to lend legitimacy by insiders that the search for information is an appropriate one…So, even though each person will approach things from a slightly different set of lenses, what holds a social reality together, and ultimately establishes proper bounds for information-seeking is the recognition by others that those behaviors are customary ones to pursue." (Chatman 1996, p. 203)

While this indicates a tension between the two frameworks, ultimately it is more a matter of where emphasis is placed – social control or individual control – than outright disagreement. The social versus individual, much like nature versus nurture or qualitative versus quantitative, can be complementary rather than adversarial, and such is the case

with these conceptual frameworks. One of Chatman's goals, as noted earlier, is to give a voice to people who have been marginalized by both the culture and consequently, studies of information behavior; Dervin's goal is to illuminate the capacity for all humans, insiders and outsiders – who, as we have seen from Merton's work, can occupy both roles simultaneously and interchangeably – to change the culture by the creation of new choices. Both goals are valid, though Dervin may possibly be seen as taking the broader view. Merton, too, may help again to shed light on this issue by noting that "Differing situations activate different status sets which then and there dominate over the rival claims of other statuses" (Merton 1972, p. 25). In the end, each informational action is determined by how an individual conceives of his or her "status sets" within that specific moment in time and space; but that individual's conception is shaped and influenced by his or her collected social experiences over a lifetime. Further reduction of this issue is not possible without compromising the holistic understanding of information behavior these researchers are cultivating.

The next framework, Savolainen's model of Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS), seems to position itself ideologically on this issue between Dervin and Chatman's work. In fact, he prefaces his model with the following discussion of Dervin's work:

> "Although the theory focuses on the individual sense-maker, it does not deny that structural factors may affect individual sense-making processes. Because these processes are approached on a rather general level, focusing on 'generic' characteristics of human information seeking and use, questions dealing with the substance of individual characteristics of information seekers, as well as socio-

cultural determinants of information seeking seem to deserve closer attention than

addressed in the sense-making theory. There are substantial issues concerning the

cognitive competence of information seekers as well as the socio-cultural factors

affecting that competence. Compared with the basic assumptions of the sense-

making theory, this study takes one step toward more substantial issues of

information seeking, however, trying to avoid individualistic or sociologist traps

as criticized by Dervin." (Savolainen 1995, p. 261)

ELIS is based on the relationship between the two concepts "way of life" and "mastery of

life." Way of life is explained as an "order of things," things being any activities taking

place in daily life, and order being how those things are prioritized. The mastery of life is

any activity contributing to the maintenance of this way of life. This mastery is mostly

passive when the way of life continues as expected; it is active when the way of life is

disrupted (Savolainen 1995, p. 263). Savolainen proposes that an individual's basic

models for the mastery of life are given by the culture in which he or she is born

(Savolainen 1995, p. 264). Encompassing the way of life and mastery of life, then, are an

individual's share in material, social, and cultural capital, which is distributed by the

society in which the individual lives (Savolainen 1995, p.267). Interestingly,

Savolainen's research comparing teachers with workers in manufacturing leads him to

state that, "In the majority of cases it was not possible to find a correlation between social

class and type of mastery of life" (Savolainen 1995, p. 286). Whether this was due to

flaws in the theory or the methodology is not clear. He still comes to the conclusion,

though questionable based on his research alone, that individuals may make choices in

individual situations but that those choices are limited by their competence, which is in

turn limited by social and cultural factors (Savolainen 1995, p. 290). Savolainen ends

with the observation based on his conclusions that Western society, "built on incessant

competition for material, social, and cultural capital between individuals and social

groups," and the ideals of equal informational access, competence, and use, are likely

incompatible (Savolainen 1995, p. 288). This is a conclusion that Chatman would

probably support based on her observations of populations incredibly disadvantaged by

the structures of Western society.

  Chatman, Dervin, and Savolainen have all contributed useful theoretical and

empirical research to the topic of social contexts that surround information behavior

within the LIS field. Their theories are largely compatible despite any surface tensions

that exist among them. Having confirmed the role that social context plays in information

behavior, Savolainen encourages further research in ELIS that encompasses information

seeking and use, types of information sources available, and the contextual/situational

factors affecting seeking and use (Savolainen 1995, p. 291). Chatman, for her part, feels

that the LIS field (which can be thought of in terms of an insider) has stereotyped users

and nonusers (who can be thought of as outsiders) of information systems like libraries,

to the detriment of actually understanding their view of information (and presumably,

information systems). She goes on to claim that:

> "Whatever the outcome to us as scholars and students of everyday information,
> the average citizen will continue to settle his or her problems in ways that speak
> to their way of life. Our challenge is to discover what issues are most critical to
> this way of life and in what areas research needs to be done to help facilitate it."
> (Chatman 2000, p.12)

Taking this conception of library and information professionals as insiders and non-professionals as outsider – especially marginalized populations – Merton's final advice in his 1972 paper seems especially apt: "Insiders and Outsiders, unite. You have nothing to lose but your claims. You have a world of understanding to win" (Merton 1972, p.44).

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