

## Chapter 9

# Chatman's Theories of Information Behavior (1996, 1999, 2000)

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### ABSTRACT

*Information behaviors are complex practices rooted within individual's everyday social and cultural dynamics. However, understanding the social and cultural dynamics of information seeking and use is a major challenge for many graduate students, scholars, and information practitioners. The objective of this chapter is to advance the understandings of social contexts and cultural situations in information behavior processes using Chatman's theories of information behaviors: theory of information poverty, theory of life in the round, and the theory of normative behavior. Over the past twenty years scholars have adopted Chatman's theories as a lens to illuminate understandings of information behaviors in diverse contexts and situations. This chapter synthesizes these studies. The chapter is useful for information professionals and scholars who are interested in applying social theories to examine the social and cultural dynamics of information practices in different settings.*

### INTRODUCTION

#### Theoretical Approaches to Human Information Behavior (HIB)

Human Information Behavior (HIB) approach addresses how people seek, manage, give, and use information in different contexts (Fisher, Erdelez, & McKechnie, 2005). "In the mid-and late 1990s [a] flurry of theoretical activity coincided with emerging consensus" about the concept of HIB

within Library and Information Science (p. XIX). HIB encompassed "information seeking as well as the totality of other unintentional or passive behaviors (such as glimpsing or encountering information), as well as purposive behaviors that do not involve seeking, such as actively avoiding information" (Case, 2007, p. 5). HIB theories developed because of a shift of focus from the structure of information systems toward users of information.

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Three theoretical approaches to HIB are apparent in the literature: cognitive, social, and multifaceted (Pettigrew, Fidel, & Bruce, 2001). The cognitive approach deals with the individual as the principal actor in information behavior. The social approach is focused on the social context of information. The multifaceted approach considers multiple types of contexts. Chatman's theories is associated with the social approach to information and is discussed.

### **Social Approach to Information**

Pettigrew et al. (2001) traced the history of the social approach to information behavior from the seminal article by Dervin and Nilan (1986), which called for a shift from a system or resource approach to a user-centered approach. The social approach to information focused on understanding the effect of interpersonal relations of information flow in society, especially addressing the “meanings and values associated with social, sociocultural, and sociolinguistics aspects of information behavior” (Pettigrew et al., 2001, p. 54). The social approach is informed by philosophies, theories, and concepts, including gratification theory, alienation theory, insider/outsider theory, diffusion of innovation theory, and the concepts of strong and weak ties. These theories and concepts provided frameworks to scholars in exploring sociocultural barriers to information practices.

Chatman (1996), a leading theorist of the social approach to information, applied gratification theory, alienation theory, and diffusion theory as conceptual frameworks to explore people and their relations to information in social settings. She asserted, “how people use information to reshape, to redefine, or to reclaim their social reality . . . is a central concern driving my research efforts” (p. 197). Since the 1980s, Chatman was the “sole researcher focusing mainly on social aspects of information” in the library and information science

(LIS) field. (Pettigrew et al., 2001, p. 59). Her work laid the foundation for the social approach to information.

In the 1990s, more theorists emerged, including Williamson (1998), Pettigrew (1999), Tuominen, and Savolainen (1997). Chatman (2000) is concerned with social barriers to information. She explored the ways individuals interact with information in the context of social and cultural perspectives of the “small world” setting. Small world is defined as a social group in which “mutual opinions and concerns are reflected by its members and in which the interests and activities of individual members are largely determined by the normative influences of the small world as a whole” (Chatman, 1999, p. 213).

Two of Chatman's (1996, 1999) earlier theories—the theory of information poverty (IP) and the theory of life in the round prepared the groundwork for the development of the theory of normative behavior. They are summarized:

### **Information Poverty Theory**

The Information Poverty (IP) theory identified social barriers as being responsible for why members of the small-world setting do not use information that is potentially useful to them. Social barriers identified by Chatman (1996) are (a) “secrecy and deception” (p. 195) arising from a sense of mistrust regarding the interest or ability of others to provide useful information; (b) membership in a social group inhibit information use because the social group establishes norms that dictate what is right and wrong for members by “[restricting] members from seeking information” outside the group (p. 197); and (c) members of a small world group rejecting information that does not conform to their “shared common sense reality” (p. 203).

IP theory identifies group norms as accounting for barriers to information use. The norms include perception by group members of a dearth of in-

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