Remembering Elfreda Chatman: A Champion of Theory Development in Library and Information Science Education

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This article tracks the process of constructing theory within the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) through an examination of Elfreda A. Chatman’s research. Chatman notes in her early publications that she did not enter the field with the intent to create theory, but as she applied established theories, she noted that there were certain aspects of the behavior she observed that were not accounted for in the theories she was analyzing. She turned her focus to the social barriers to information access and began to frame her work with concepts and propositions that explained what she observed. By examining Chatman’s use of key theories from the social sciences, this article demonstrates the viability of the application and creation of social theory within the LIS discipline.

Keywords: Information poverty, normative behavior, social theory, information access, literature review

Introduction

A primary aim of research is to find patterns of regularity whereby we can better understand the world and universe through organized, methodical logic and observation (Babbie, 2001). This methodical process of observation is organized by means of shared lenses through which phenomena are examined. Thomas Kuhn (1962), in his classic work exploring the nature of scientific revolutions, describes scientific research as being guided by theories and paradigms, paradigms being the larger frameworks used to guide examination of various phenomena, and theories being more specific explanations of particular phenomena within the scope of the paradigm.

As students learn and understand the use of theory related to leadership, information access, information behavior, and other core topics germane to information studies, they are better prepared to advocate policy, and help design LIS curricula and other measures aimed at improving information access and understanding in the academic and practical environments in which they will practice. The need for more theory in the study of LIS has been recognized in recent writings (e.g., Pettigrew & McKechnie, 2001; Hall, 2003); however, there has been little to encourage theory building by offering guidance on how theory is created in LIS. The social study of information is one area that has received some attention in the research thus far, but is ripe for still more development of theories and models (Case, 2007; Fisher, Erdelez, & McKechnie, 2005). This article provides one example of how to teach practical use of theory and theory building through a review of Elfreda A. Chatman’s information poverty research.
Chatman's Early Work as Exemplar

By looking at Chatman's publications from 1983 to 1996, one can see the process of LIS theory construction as she used extant theory to examine social information behaviors, paying special attention to the customs and trends that create information barriers. Chatman frequently ended her articles with exhortations to libraries to be more aware of the social barriers that impede the access to information underserved patrons might be facing (e.g., Chatman, 1985a, 1987a, 1987b, 1991a, 1991b, 1992; Chatman & Pendleton, 1995; Pendleton & Chatman, 1998), thus drawing a connection between theory and practice.

Chatman writes in her early publications that she began with the common assumption that information poverty is linked with economic poverty. She notes that her definition of information poverty for her early work stemmed from Childers and Post's (1975) *The Information Poor in America*, which defines information poverty as an "information void" (p. 33), and Duran's (1977) dissertation, *Latino Communication Patterns*, which states that "a pattern of information poverty . . . restricts access to information for solving problems in many critical areas" (p. 5, as cited in Chatman, 1985b, p. 99). Both of these works focus primarily on economic factors (poverty) that resulted in lack of access to information (information poverty). As her work progressed, however, she found that this paring not as reliable as researchers supposed. Rather than solely consider economic factors leading to separation from needed information, she asked "What [non-economic] factors are present that would account for an information-poor lived-experience?" (Chatman, 1996a, p. 194) Upon further study Chatman posited that information poverty was not so much due to economic poverty but was more closely linked to a set of socially determined attitudes and norms.

Chatman used ethnographic methods to study the small world lives of her chosen populations. She studied information diffusion, opinion leadership, and the use of leisure time with regard to the pursuit of information among low-income heads of household women in Berkeley, California (Chatman, 1983, 1985a, 1985b, 1986, 1987a). She looked at attributes of alienation and gratification in university janitors in the Southeast (Chatman, 1987b, 1990, 1991a). She took social network theory to a southern retirement home (Chatman, 1991b, 1992), and then attempted to round off her ideas regarding small world lives by looking at the information behaviors of prison inmates (Chatman, 1999; Pendleton & Chatman, 1998). She applied concepts from established social theory to the field data she collected through observations of and structured interviews with the populations she studied, eventually setting aside established theory and constructing three key social theories of information behavior regarding information poverty and small world existence which she called her "small world" theories: the theory of information poverty, the theory of life in the round, and the theory of normative behavior (Chatman, 2000).

This article will focus on the first four social theories Chatman used in her research: diffusion theory, opinion-leadership theory, alienation theory, and gratification theory. Her publications in which she discusses her use of these four theories in light of her study of information poverty show a clear process of theory use and illustrate very plainly her journey as she searched for a theory that could explain the information behaviors she observed in her ethnographic studies.

The populations Chatman studied were for the most part women—specifically, women who were not part of the mainstream social population of their larger environments. Her populations consisted
of the economically bereft (i.e., the unemployed), those who felt they were in a satellite roles in their particular environment (i.e., university janitors), those who feared that sharing information could be detrimental to their autonomy (i.e., aging women in a retirement community), and those who were clearly isolated from mainstream society (i.e., maximum-security prison inmates).

**Chatman’s Use of Theory**

Chatman chose to look at information from the point of view of the small world of those whom she identified as information poor. Chatman defined the information poor as people who “perceive themselves to be devoid of any sources that might help them” (1996a, p. 197). More than a simple lack of information access, Chatman’s definition of information poverty incorporates a sense of individual perception within a framework of shared social norms. It is not that there is not information available, but rather the individual does not perceive that available sources are in fact helpful. Along these same lines, Chatman defined information poverty as a concept “partially associated with class distinction. That is, the condition of information poverty is influenced by outsiders who withhold privileged access to information,” but it is the reactive behavior of the insiders, responding with “self-protective behaviors which are used in response to social norms,” that leads to the recurring separation of the information poor from the information they need (Chatman, 1996a, p. 197).

While individuals might doubt that others can fully understand what they need or are trying to express, we invariably adopt social networks with other individuals who maintain a similar lifestyle and have common beliefs and perspectives on life and the world around us. The thrust of Chatman’s argument is that “our membership within a particular social group contributes to information poverty” (Chatman, 1996a, p. 197, emphasis added).

**Diffusion Theory**

The first theory Chatman used when beginning her exploration of information poverty was Rogers’ (1962) *Diffusion of Innovation* (a theory originally intended to describe the diffusion of technological innovations in farming communities). Chatman applied diffusion theory to employment-related information dissemination. She noted that in dispersing a new innovation, information must first be spread to inform potential adapters of the new technology. She noted that diffusion theory is, in fact, “relevant to the study of the diffusion of information in general, not just information about technological innovations,” and then proceeded to apply the theory to “ordinary information that is new to a person or group” (Chatman, 1983, p. 80).

Chatman used diffusion theory to explore information diffusion among a population of unemployed women in Berkeley (1986). She looked at job information as the innovation under consideration. Although Chatman would not begin consciously framing her own theories for another decade, she was consistent in her awareness of the need for using theory as a tool of understanding. Chatman (1986) wrote:

> Should this [diffusion] theory fit the process of communication which exists among low-income potential users, we would have available a tool for understanding a neglected area of information service. . . . In the diffusion process a person becomes aware of an innovation and communicates this awareness to someone else. That person in turn communicates it, and so on as the innovation is spread or diffused. (p. 377)

Her stance noted here is that by tracing the diffusion of one particular,
much-needed type of information, barriers can be identified and the informing process can be enhanced in order to reduce the information gaps of the poor. Likewise, once this diffusion process is clearly mapped, other practical information could be diffused in a similar manner.

Chatman found diffusion theory to be limited, however, when applied to the information dissemination she was observing among her chosen population. For example, with regard to employment information, once job information is “used”—once the job has been filled—it is then of no value to others, as only a certain number of people can be hired; therefore, there is no need for others to “adopt” it (Chatman, 1986, p. 384).

Chatman concluded that the diffusion of ideas is “similar in some respects to the diffusion of any other innovation,” but noted the marked differences (Chatman, 1983, p. 79). For example, in another article on the same topic, she wrote that, while four of the five attributes of the innovation model of diffusion theory, relative advantage (the degree of superiority a new innovation has over the one it replaces), compatibility (how well the innovation meets existing needs), complexity (how easy or difficult it is to adopt the innovation), and trialability (how easily the innovation can be tested before implementation), were easily applied to information diffusion, the fifth, observability (how visible the results of the innovation are to others), was not as readily applicable because of “the difficulty involved in observing the information respondents might have had about jobs” (Chatman, 1986, p. 384).

Finally, Chatman wrote of a need for a change in the model of the attributes of innovation to account for the element of risk within the concept of relative advantage (Chatman, 1986, p. 383). Risk takers and extroverts were more likely to obtain valued job information earlier than non-risk takers and introverts.

**Opinion Leadership Theory**

Opinion leadership theory was Chatman’s second chosen conceptual framework, as she “was curious about people who are perceived to be information providers” (1996b, ¶ 5). She defined opinion leaders as those pretty much “like everyone else” except that they had more of a taste for the world at large; an opinion leader is “the person most aware of new information and most influential in diffusion of that information to others within a given social environment” (1987b, p. 341). She noted that the presence of such leaders indicated a phenomenon of individuals seeking out other individuals for advice and information (1987b, p. 341). Chatman (1987b) notes that opinion leaders shared the six characteristics of:

1. greater social participation;
2. gregariousness;
3. cosmopolitanism;
4. greater exposure to the mass media;
5. higher social status; and
6. greater adherence to system norms. (pp. 341–342)

Chatman wrote that she thought opinion leaders would be useful as disseminators of useful and timely information. But, while she did identify opinion leaders among her studied groups, these leaders did not always act as information resources for their small world groups. Opinion leaders tended to withhold the information they perceived as more valuable. Chatman reported that, when presented with “new information, e.g., possible job leads or techniques to secure permanent employment, [opinion leaders] would not want to lessen their chances of getting a job by telling someone else about it” (1987b, p. 351). This guarding of information by those more privy to timely and valued information than the general public comes in to play in Chatman’s postulates regarding infor-
 Alienation Theory

Chatman next looked at alienation theory to try and understand the information behavior of a population of university janitors who felt they did not have access to “a support network that could enhance a sharing process” (Chatman, 1990, p. 355). Chatman wanted to determine why these low-income laborers so integral to the university’s functioning were so clearly “on the periphery of institutional services” (1990, p. 355). She acknowledged a large body of theorists who had previously studied societal alienation, including Weber (Gerth & Mills, 1946), Merton (1968), and Durkheim (1964). She explored Seeman’s (1959) five concepts of alienation, powerlessness (the feeling that one does not have control over one’s personal or work environment), meaninglessness, (the inability to solve problems rationally), isolation (not adhering to the same values as the rest of society), self-estrangement (the depreciation of anything one does oneself, adding value based only on others’ regard), and normlessness (inappropriate social behavior), as they applied to the janitors. She found that while the janitors did share attributes of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement, she saw no evidence of normlessness. This concept of normlessness, she notes, “refers to the breakdown of appropriate standards of behavior held by members of the larger society” (Chatman, 1990, p. 361). She observed instead that the janitors engaged in socially acceptable behavior, and that deviant behavior was, in fact, “frowned upon by respondents” (Chatman 1990, p. 361). In other words, the janitors adhered to social norms, but did not feel the benefits of the society to which they were conforming were reaching them.

Chatman’s work brought alienation theory into the information poverty discussion. The theory did not fully explain what Chatman observed among the janitor population, but the observation that the janitors shared feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and self-estrangement implied that the study of information poverty should include more than simply the observation of information diffusion and delivery. Information acceptance, or the conditions that lead to its acceptance, must include consideration of the individuals’ perception of the information efficacy.

Gratification Theory

Finding alienation theory to be incomplete for describing what she was observing, Chatman next turned to gratification theory. She found six postulates in the literature dealing with social stratification. She cited such authors as Cooley (1956), Bogart (1950/1951), Garfinkel (1964), Teahan (1958), and Dervin and Greenberg (1972) as researchers providing “a number of propositional statements that comprise gratification theory [that] have been used to guide research about poor people and their social world” (Chatman, 1991a, p. 438). In her use of gratification theory, Chatman (1991a) listed six propositions from the literature she reviewed. These propositions note that poor individuals often:

1. Live life in a small world (e.g., information originating outside the local environment holds little of interest for the lower class);
2. Have lower expectations and the belief in luck (e.g., poor people may not succeed because they do not look for unproven opportunities, but when they do succeed they say it is because of luck or fate rather than opportunity or skill);
3. Live a first-level lifestyle (e.g., people in the lower socioeconomic classes pre-
fer to seek information mainly from others like themselves—horizontal communication flow;

4. Have a limited-time horizon (e.g., the lower socioeconomic class view of time is of "the immediate present and the very recent past");

5. Have an insider's worldview (i.e., the outside world is unpredictable and hostile); and

6. Use the mass media differently than do higher socioeconomic classes (e.g., "mass media, particularly television, is viewed as a medium of escape, stimulation, and fantasy" rather than an information source). (pp. 438-442)

Applying these postulates to the social information behaviors she observed in the janitor population, Chatman reported that gratification theory adequately explained the information behavior of the university janitors: "findings indicate that [gratification] theory can be used to explain immediate gratification behavior and to advance propositions as to why these behaviors appear more prevalent in the lower working classes" (Chatman, 1991a, p. 447). She pointed to the janitors' "here-and-now existence" as the key to understanding why information seeking does not occur (Chatman, 1991a, p. 447). The janitors do not perceive that information will "lend... significant benefit to their situation" (Chatman, 1991a, p. 447).

As noted, alienation theory had led Chatman to the idea that self-perception and feelings of social acceptance or marginalization contribute to information poverty. Gratification theory supported the idea that individual perceptions, shaped within the context of the small world, in turn shape one's information acceptance. Chatman found gratification theory to be a useful in explaining aspects of information poverty that did not seem to be addressed with other theories.

Conclusion

Although Chatman continued to explore the concept of information poverty with social network theory and later developed her own theory of information poverty, theory of life in the round, and theory of normative behavior, this overview of her earlier use of theory as she began her studies of an information phenomenon can be used in LIS education to show how extant theory can be used in social research within the field and to promote the creation of LIS-specific theory.

Chatman began her work drawing upon concepts and conceptual frameworks from other fields to explain what she was observing. Her work was focused on describing everyday information phenomena, and each theory she later published built upon the previous theory, unifying these smaller theories by larger theoretical concepts. Her work demonstrates that small theories can be built into larger ones that can then be applied beyond the original context. LIS researchers can follow this pattern to build theory for the field out of smaller theories nested within the research that is already occurring, allowing LIS to develop into a field with a mature foundation of original theory.

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