



Classic

Gratification Theory Provides a Useful Framework for Understanding the Information Seeking Behaviours and Needs of Distinct Populations

A review of:

Chatman, E. A. (1991). Life in a small world: Applicability of gratification theory to information-seeking behavior. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 42(6), 438-449.

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Abstract

Objective – Apply gratification theory to the information-seeking behaviours and use of information by a lower working class population.

Design – An ethnographic study framed by social stratification literature was utilized to explore, describe and interpret the everyday information needs, information-seeking behaviours and views of information held by lower working class individuals.

Setting – A major university in the southeast United States, specifically the physical plant facilities including classrooms, bathrooms, janitorial closets, and front steps.

Subjects – The participants were 52 lower working class janitorial staff at a major university. The majority of subjects were single black women in their late 30s. The women had children and were the heads of their households. The women had not completed high school and earned minimum wage; they had been at their jobs for an average of seven years. The workers' supervisors, and others at the physical plant, were also contacted as part of the study.

Methods – Ethnographic data was collected over a two-year period, 1984-86, through participation in the setting and interviews. A 28-item interview guide was used to identify participants' job-search strategies, use of mass media, television viewing behaviours, and

acceptance of information from individuals and believable sources of information.

Main results – Chatman confirmed the usefulness of gratification theory as a conceptual framework to identify what defines information problems, motivations, and information seeking behaviours for an impoverished population. The results support the findings of social stratification research on the parallel between impoverished individuals' social life and their orientation toward gratification. A focus on local present reality due to pressing economic and psychological problems orients lower working class individuals toward immediate gratification. Thus, information sources of value to the participants were those readily accessible and easy to use in the moment of need.

The six theoretical propositions of gratification theory Chatman identified through her literature review were applied and confirmed in her analysis of the information behaviours of janitorial workers:

1. **Life in a Small World.** Lower working class individuals have a local worldview and therefore have limited exposure to job opportunities compared to other populations. The majority of Chatman's subjects found out about their current job through friends and family employed at the university (51%), or neighbours employed there (11%).
2. **Lower Expectations and the Belief in Luck.** Individuals of the population have lower expectations of their success and therefore do not actively pursue new opportunities; success is seen as a result of luck. Janitorial workers in the study felt they were lucky to have found their jobs and that their chances of finding a better position were slight and based on "knowing someone" (p. 444).
3. **First-Level Lifestyle.** Members of the population rely on information from members of their social circles. Study participants sought everyday information from family, friends, neighbours, local newspapers, and television. Information was considered reliable in their view if it aligned with their personal experience, was presented by multiple people,

or if the person sharing the information was perceived as trustworthy.

4. **Limited-Time Horizon.** Lower working class populations experience a time immediacy and limitation different from those of the middle and upper classes. Study participants imagined their future job positions and lifestyles as similar to the ones they currently held, due to perceptions that opportunities were not open to them or worth the effort to pursue. Some exceptions were the possibility of pursuing higher education and having more leisure time in the future.

5. **An "Insider" Worldview.** The worldview of an insider is focused "on the practical dimensions of life" (p. 445); information relevant to lower working class individuals is that which "solve[s] problematic situations" (p. 441). Study participants' social conversations revolved around events that reinforced their mental models. Respondents relied on themselves and distrusted those outside their social circles.

6. **Use of the Mass Media.** Mass media is perceived as a vehicle for passing time, escape, and entertainment, as well as a reflection of lived realities for the population. Respondents indicated that they watched television to pass time, and, secondarily, for practical purposes (e.g., learning how to be safe).

Conclusion – Gratification theory provides a useful framework for library and information professionals to identify how populations define information problems and reliable sources, and their information seeking behaviours and motivations. Chatman's analysis indicates that the everyday problems faced by the lower working class are not, and will not be, met by traditional sources that information professionals assume to be of value for the population. Based on these research results, Chatman calls on information professionals to critically evaluate and broaden their understanding of how problems are defined and addressed by the specific populations they seek to serve – to consider the relationships between the pressing realities of their service populations and everyday information that addresses those realities. This understanding will enable information

professionals to determine if, how, and by what means, they should develop and package information to meet the needs of their service populations and communities.

Commentary

Chatman's article confirms the applicability of gratification theory for understanding the information-seeking behaviours of lower working class populations. The use of an ethnographic study framed by social stratification theory was appropriate to address Chatman's research questions (Creswell, 1998). Yet, there are several shortcomings in the study documentation, leaving scholars with questions and unable to replicate the study.

Chatman indicated a rationale for the selection of her subjects and a profile of their characteristics. She stated that the janitorial workers "typified in many ways the lower working class" (p. 442). Further discussion of the rationale for selecting janitorial workers, or the specific participants of the staff, is not provided, nor is a definition of the lower working class for the purpose of the study.

Chatman indicated that a 28-item interview guide was used in the study. In one instance she uses the term survey but it is unclear if this was a separate tool from the interview guide. While select interview questions are included in the article, the full instrument is not. There is neither mention of how the instrument was developed, tested, or administered, nor when the interviews took place during the two-year time period of the study. The reader is not told how the interviews were documented, for example, if responses were recorded and transcribed, or dictated from notes or memory.

Given the qualitative nature of the study, numbers and percentages are only used in the article to represent the number of study participants. Quotations from the janitorial workers are included in the article. For example, Chatman cites one participant: "I

made three job trips down here before I got the job. The one who gave me this job told me I was lucky. I got here just in time 'cause they had only two openings.'" (p. 443). It is not clear if this, or other, quotations in the article emerged from Chatman's participant observations, from a formal interview she conducted, or via other means.

In addition to missing definitions and information on the instrument, data documentation, and the study chronology, Chatman's article lacks an explanation of how data was analyzed. Scholars are left questioning how the interviews, conversations, and observations that comprised the study came in most cases to parallel the behaviours and ways of life of the lower working class as detailed in the social stratification literature on gratification theory. It is unknown if Chatman coded her observations and interviews to reveal themes, traditionally part of a grounded theory study (Creswell, 1998), or if she interpreted her findings based on the six propositions of gratification theory identified in her literature review.

Chatman's work responded to and aligned with a paradigm shift in information needs and uses research – from researchers viewing information as objective and users as "input-output processors of information" to a view of "information as something constructed by human beings" (Dervin & Nilan, 1986, p. 16). While the reliability and validity of Chatman's study cannot be confirmed due to the absence of data collection and data analysis information, her study has been influential. Results from a cited reference search in the ISI Web of Knowledge database indicate Chatman's article has been cited 54 times since its publication in studies of populations ranging from Maori secondary school students to clergy and Canadian immigrants.

Interest in the ways in which individuals conceptualize and seek information in both everyday life and research-driven situations is present in the work of scholars today, and their research continues to be framed by well-

established theories and to employ qualitative methodologies. For example, Sadler and Given (2007) apply affordance theory from ecological psychology to the information behaviours of graduate students in an academic library, using qualitative interviews, resulting in recommendations for improving communication between graduate students and librarians as well as for the library's information literacy instruction. Chatman's study serves as a critical reminder that in order to meet the information needs of service populations, librarians and information professionals need to first research and understand the ways in which the social context of those populations affects their information definitions, needs, and behaviours.

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