

Article

Information Abundance and Deficit: Revisiting Elfreda Chatman's Inquiry of Marginal Spaces and Populations

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ABSTRACT

The article presents a methodological analysis of Elfreda Chatman's research on marginal populations. Revisiting the methodological legacy and influence of Chatman's research addresses positioning of the marginal within information environments in the presentation of theory. The position of deficit or lack in the communities under study are juxtaposed with abundance revealed in differing forms of Chatman's research. This article first reviews how Chatman's work challenges methodological hegemonic practices of theory development in Library and Information Science (LIS) research. Secondly, three works are analyzed for methodological approach and processes in theory development. Each article is observed in terms of design, approach, researcher (role, voice, position, posture), and theory development (as a methodological construct). Lastly, recommendations on impact of methodological approach and positioning reveal the impetus for the proposed article, deconstructing the researcher and their extension of theory-making in marginal spaces.

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INTRODUCTION

When I was a graduate student, I was assigned the task of profiling information researcher Elfreda A. Chatman as part of a course assignment. The professor said that my perspectives aligned most with her work. I prepared the requisite elements of the assignment, describing her research path, and summarizing her epistemic legacy. Through reading and analysis of the work, I heard a unique voice expressive of marginalized people and communities and their relationship to information and libraries.¹ As a student, I found a kindred spirit of sorts with whom to explore invisible frontiers. Over time, however, my philosophical and scholarly development led me to question, not what Chatman accomplished, but from what perspective her inquiry occurred. Peeling back the layers of extant, marginal, and invisible communities is a hallmark of the methodological legacy of Elfreda Chatman's work.² Through her work in theory development and application, she adopted an ethnographic approach to information behavior research, legitimizing efforts to engage with lived experiences in marginalized environments. Her use of qualitative methods and analysis demonstrated resistance through innovation, yet the deficit parameters which framed the inquiry both limited and liberated the population under study.³ This represented a duality or a tension in studying the information behavior of people in marginalized communities. I refer to these communities in this paper as "outsider communities" in the tradition of Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, a Black feminist essay collection originally published in 1984 that openly claimed the outsider stance as its primary perspective.⁴ Chatman's work characterized this duality as "lack," reducing *and* amplifying outsiders' information structures.

To better understand this duality, I engage in a reverent but critical analysis of Chatman's methodological and conceptual approach to understanding information in outsider communities. In this paper I describe and critique the deficit-abundance dualism, informed by the social-informational perspectives of so-called "deficit populations." I also

¹ For an overview of Chatman's work see Murat Erkan Eren, "An Author Report: Elfreda Annmary Chatman," *Journal of Human Sciences* 13, no. 1 (2016): 844-850; Crystal Fulton, "An Ordinary Life in the Round: Elfreda Annmary Chatman," *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 45, no. 2 (2010): 238-259; and Kim Thompson, "Remembering Elfreda Chatman: A Champion of Theory Development in Library and Information Science Education," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 50, no. 2 (2009): 119-126.

² Fulton, "An Ordinary life in the Round," 241.

³ Margaret Anzul, Judith F. Evans, Rita King, and Dora Tellier-Robinson. "Moving Beyond a Deficit Perspective with Qualitative Research Methods," *Exceptional Children* 67, no. 2 (2001): 235-249.

⁴ In the foreword of the 2007 edition, Cheryl Clark emphasizes Audre Lorde's "outsider" stance. See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York, NY: Crown Publishing Group, 2007), 6.

discuss Chatman’s methodological practices in the development and application of theory and analyze three selected works in terms of their design, approach, researcher positionality, and methodological constructs. The paper concludes with a reconciliation of deficit and abundance postures in theoretical design.

TO HAVE AND HAVE-NOT

Abundance is antonymic to deficit. Where deficit is concerned with what is missing, abundance can be defined by the recognition of the unique and diverse representations of information in each community or place of study. These research postures—deficit and abundance—give shape to often invisible epistemic notions of what constitute “problems” to be studied within a community. Deficit centers on so-called “maladjustments.” In the field of education, Richard R. Valencia defines deficit thinking as a “person-centered representation of school failure among individuals linked to group membership (typically the combination of racial/ethnic minority status and economic disadvantage).”⁵ His discussion of deficit thinking highlights the tools of oppression, power imbalance, victim blaming, and negative bias. Researchers approaching fields of study with deficit thinking reflect a model that is prescriptive and grounded in an assumed continuum between superiority and pathology. This biased framework is present even in those studies that honor so-called victims instead of blaming them,⁶ represented in the rhetoric of information poverty, lack of access, information barriers, and digital divides. Such framings acknowledge externally imposed information realities that are certainly present for members of these communities, but they also minimize the value of internal information structures that do exist within those communities. They assign rank to information experiences and demote what is not normative. Other theories describing

⁵ Richard R. Valencia, “Conceptualizing the Notion of Deficit Thinking,” in *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice*, ed. Richard R. Valencia (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1997), 12.

⁶ Richard R. Valencia and Daniel G. Solórzano, “Contemporary Deficit Thinking,” *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice*, ed. Richard R. Valencia (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1997), 160-210; and Donna Y. Ford, J. John Harris III, Cynthia A. Tyson, and Michelle Frazier Trotman, “Beyond Deficit Thinking: Providing Access for Gifted African American Students,” *Roeper Review* 24, no. 2 (2001): 52-58.

information communities,⁷ information grounds,⁸ and small worlds⁹ explore how information is entwined with the social, geographic, and temporal positioning of individuals and groups. Together these theories show how the field of information straddles the line between deficit and abundance, undervaluing information systems and institutions that impact the lives of underserved.

As a developing scholar, I wanted to focus on Black feminist information environments. With over eight years of experience as a librarian, libraries became my point of reference. My study of a group of African American mothers and their fight for a library in a public housing community in 1960s Chicago¹⁰ convinced me that narratives about community justice in the face of economic isolation were worth telling. These stories and their lessons are vital to the history of public libraries and communities of color. As I probed the historical record, I found accounts that minimized and belittled these women's power and impact by reducing them to patronizing caricatures, as poor people with promise. On the other hand, local news articles and community manuscripts awakened me to *their* voices and shifted my perspective. Rather than thinking about them as sidelined community warriors, I could see them as a collective, abundant in their dialog with the world, and personifying information. Their community collective, and its interaction with local municipal and administrative entities, embodied liberatory information practice. They *were* information in body and action.

Abundance celebrates outsider communities rather than condemning them.¹¹ An abundance perspective takes the researcher beyond the hegemonic discourses and values that often pre-define communities in information research. Instead, wealth is defined and operationalized in terms of the equilibrium of values, embodied systems, and networks within a community, rather than imposed aspirational outcomes.¹² Abundance postures resist paradigmatic interpretations of so-called "deprived" communities, valuing

⁷ Karen E. Fisher and J.C. Durrance, "Information Communities," *Encyclopedia of Community: From the Village to the Virtual World 4* (2003): 658-660.

⁸ Karen E. Fisher and Charles M. Naumer, "Information Grounds: Theoretical Basis and Empirical Findings on Information Flow in Social Settings," in *New Directions in Human Information Behavior*, ed. Amanda Spink and Charles Cole (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 93-111.

⁹ Elfreda A. Chatman, "Life in a Small World: Applicability of Gratification Theory to Information-Seeking Behavior," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 42, no. 6 (1991): 438-449.

¹⁰ LaVerne Gray, "Chicago Public Housing Library Movement, 1961-1969: A Social Network Analysis of Primary Source Documents" (Poster presentation, *iConference 2015*, Newport Beach, CA, March 24-27, 2015).

¹¹ Kafi D. Kumasi, "Roses in the Concrete: A Critical Race Perspective on Urban Youth and School Libraries," *Knowledge Quest* 40, no. 5 (2012): 32.

¹² Valencia, "Evolution of Deficit Thinking," 9.

their richness on their own terms. This is not to say that research that acknowledges economic, social, or political discrimination faced by marginalized communities is inherently wrong, but that the recognition of different kinds of wealth balances researcher perspectives and informs more honest, richer meaning-making.

HEGEMONIC LOOKING GLASS

Deficit postures pervade educational and sociological research. The preponderance of guidance to “fix” outsider communities characterizes them as perpetually abnormal and deprived.¹³ These studies function as a powerful tool, a sort of hegemonic looking glass that reflects differences, distorts deviation into deviance, and casts deprivation as depravity. Practically speaking, deficit positioning pushes community members to the margins of research, policy, and governance discussions.¹⁴ Overcoming and creating equity requires just actions by community members—including information professionals.¹⁵

The deficit discourse is highlighted in Todd Honma’s¹⁶ critique of libraries and librarianship, especially in relationship to “whiteness as normalcy” in the information sphere. That critique highlighted the perspective of those invisible and omitted from the so-called neutral and egalitarian positioning of libraries. I argue that Chatman’s theoretical focus on studying community (e.g., poor women, janitorial workers, imprisoned women) went beyond merely incorporating deficit thinking reminiscent of the Culture of Poverty,¹⁷ but her work simultaneously unveiled and devalued the information cultures of outsider communities. This was despite careful consideration of methodological approaches and researcher vulnerability to the task. Chatman laid a foundation, going beyond a templated path, constructing an innovative practice of theory application and middle-range theory creation.¹⁸ The combined effects of an

¹³ William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1976).

¹⁴ T.J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (1985): 567-593.

¹⁵ Examples include Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Elfreda A. Chatman and Victoria E.M. Pendleton, “Knowledge Gap, Information-Seeking and the Poor,” *The Reference Librarian* 23, nos. 49-50: 135-145.

¹⁶ Todd Honma, “Trippin’ over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies,” *InterActions: UCLA journal of education and information studies* 1, no. 2 (2005).

¹⁷ The theory of the “culture of poverty” frames poverty as a result of purported “behavior patterns” of poor and ethnic minorities. See Oscar Lewis, “The Culture of Poverty,” *Scientific American* 215, no. 4 (1966): 19.

¹⁸ Murat Erkan Eren, “An Author Report: Elfreda Annmary Chatman,” *Journal of Human Sciences* 13, no. 1 (2016): 844-850.

interdisciplinary stance and anthropological methods in the study of information provided a freedom of insight and resistance in meaning-making using a qualitative paradigm.¹⁹ This tension between innovation and exploitation in outsider communities is emblematic of Chatman's work.

Elfreda Chatman's naturalistic approach to research within everyday information environments demonstrates the power of leveraging ethnographic approaches to express the perspective of the marginalized. Gobo defines ethnography as a "methodology which privileges the cognitive mode of observation as its primary source of information,"²⁰ with sources of information including "informal conversations, individual or group interviews, and documentary materials."²¹ Ethnography was traditionally an exercise in illuminating the "other." Researchers immersed themselves in cultures to observe and document behaviors and systems.²² The researcher was also a colonizer, imposing outsider notions on the cultures being observed and documented. These practices eventually gave way to new ethnographic approaches, ostensibly shedding the paternalistic lens.

The balance between the information within a social structure and information as thing or place²³ make ethnography in LIS unique.²⁴ Chatman's ethnographic approach places significance on both the internal information or network structure of small worlds and the value of access to external information.²⁵ Her use of ethnographic observation and interviews suggest a commitment to participant perspectives but many of her analyses still take a deficit posture. This paper seeks to reconcile the balance of the deficit and abundance perspective in design, approach, analysis, of Chatman's ethnographic work.

Using ethnography in LIS research provides an opportunity to explore many kinds of environments, including libraries and other information organizations/institutions, communities of service and practice, student populations, and others.²⁶ The application of naturalistic inquiry in these varied spaces provides what Chatman describes as an insider view of members through observation over a length of time.²⁷ The distance of the

¹⁹ Kirsty Williamson, "Research in Constructivist Frameworks Using Ethnographic Techniques," *Library Trends* 55, no. 1 (2006): 83-101.

²⁰ Gobo, *Doing Ethnography*, 15

²¹ Gobo, 7.

²² Giampietro Gobo, *Doing Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008).

²³ Michael K. Buckland, "Information as Thing," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 42, no. 5 (1991): 351-360.

²⁴ Khoo, Rozaklis, and Hall, "A Survey of Use of Ethnographic Methods."

²⁵ Eren, "An Author Report: Elfreda Annmary Chatman."

²⁶ Khoo, Rozaklis, and Hall, "A Survey of use of Ethnographic Methods."

²⁷ Elfreda A. Chatman, "An Insider/Outsider Approach to Libraries, Change, and Marginalized Populations" (Keynote address, Mötessplats Inför Framtiden, Borås, Sweden, April 23-25, 2001),

researcher while developing and maintaining relationship to the community under study provides a constant tension; Chatman's ethnographic approach attempts to resolve this with respect for the social environment, rigor in information collecting, and honoring the role of theory building and application. In making her case for the internal structure of information space in a "small world," Chatman explains:

...most of the occurrences in this world are the result of information that holds it together. In this sense, when information does come in it is viewed as appropriate and normal. On the other hand, most of the information produced outside the small world of marginal people has little lasting value to the reality of their lives.²⁸

This tension between the delegitimization and honoring of information in communities sets the tone for Chatman's approach to researching the production and circulation of information in marginalized communities. Often the "closed" cultures that ethnographic research aims to study exist outside of established perspectives in library and information science. Chatman's approach acknowledges what is (or may be) "missing" from the perspectives of mainstream LIS discourse while recognizing that something of value exists in marginalized communities that might elude or exceed that discourse.

MODE OF ANALYSIS

To better understand and explore deficit and abundance positions in the use qualitative approaches in marginalized communities by Elfreda Chatman, this article performs a rhetorical analysis of three key writings, chosen based on emphasis of methods and their contributions to the development and application of theory. The chosen works demonstrate the maturity of Chatman's scholarship over time in theorizing information in marginal communities.²⁹ In her earlier work, the application of sociological theories to information spaces in everyday lives became theory development.³⁰ Each work was read for theoretical assertions and researcher dialogue on the approach to the communities being studied.

"Information, Mass Media, and the Working Poor," published in 1985, reflects Chatman's early post-dissertation work. At the time of publication, Chatman was an

accessed March 15, 2022, <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A909801&dswid=9728>.

²⁸ Chatman, "An Insider/Outsider Approach," 4.

²⁹ Fulton, "An Ordinary Life in the Round," 241.

³⁰ Aurora González-Teruel and Francisca Abad-García, "The Influence of Elfreda Chatman's Theories: A Citation Context Analysis," *Scientometrics* 117, no. 3 (2018): 1793-1819.

assistant professor at Louisiana State University. The article was submitted and accepted within a year (1984), after the completion of her doctoral studies in 1983.³¹ This early work reflects an extension of Chatman's dissertation work, exploring information spaces within a marginalized community. The article was published in *Library and Information Science Research*, a journal that describes itself as "focus[ing] on the research process in library and information science, especially demonstrations of innovative methods and theoretical frameworks or unusual extensions or applications of well-known methods and tools."³² The representation of both methods and phenomena investigated by Chatman's article makes it a worthy choice for analysis. The rigor employed in exploring the information sources, access, and credibility among women participating in an employment training program demonstrates the promise of libraries in a hidden community.

In 1990, "Alienation Theory: Application of a Conceptual Framework to a Study of Information among Janitors," was published and is exemplary of Chatman's application of sociological theory to the field of inquiry. The article was published in *RQ*, now *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, the "official journal of the Reference and User Services Association of the American Library Association. The article was selected for this analysis because of the explicit nature of Chatman's transparency of methods and the movement into a world outside the bounds of the library. As a journal, *RQ* aims to "disseminate information of interest to reference librarians, information specialists, and other professionals involved in user-oriented library services."³³ At the time of publication, Chatman was an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The study was supported by a 1984 summer research grant from Louisiana State University, and the data collected between 1984 and 1985.³⁴ This work is an early example of her use of ethnographic methods to extend previously collected survey and interview data. This study continues Chatman's exploration of "social and information worlds of a poor population"³⁵ and can be read as an extension of Chatman's prior research. Notably, this article demonstrates Chatman's increasingly nuanced views with respect to the rhetoric of the deficit/abundance dichotomy.

The third article analyzed here is Chatman's 1999 article, "A Theory of Life in the Round," which focused on another hidden population: women in a maximum-security

³¹ Elfreda A. Chatman, "Information, Mass Media Use, and the Working Poor," *Library and Information Science Research* 7, no. 2 (1985): 97-113.

³² *Library & Information Science Research*, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.journals.elsevier.com/library-and-information-science-research>.

³³ *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://journals.ala.org/index.php/rusq>.

³⁴ Elfreda A. Chatman, "Alienation Theory: Application of a Conceptual Framework to a Study of Information among Janitors," *RQ* (1990): 355-368.

³⁵ Chatman, "Alienation Theory," 357.

prison. The article was published in the highly regarded *Journal of the American Society for Information Science (JASIS)*, now the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology (JASIST)*.³⁶ The journal reaches a wide audience, and the use of innovation in methods to create an information social theory is well-placed. As an example of Chatman's interest in theory development, "A Theory of Life in the Round" continues Chatman's work previously published in JASIS in 1996, "The Impoverished Life World of Outsiders."³⁷ This third article was selected for its reach and influence, the methods of inquiry (ethnography), and Chatman's larger contributions to the development of theory for LIS. Taken together, the three examples selected for this analysis illustrate a trajectory of theoretical development in studying marginalized communities and of a researcher with an evolving perspective on notions of deficit and abundance over time.

Analytical Framework

A framework of five elements is used for this analysis into abundance and deficit as they appear in Chatman's work. Deconstructive analysis involves a descriptive coding of the design of the article, and critical analysis of the researcher role and how and where notions of abundance/deficit appear within the texts. The analysis breaks the articles into parts and reads passages in isolation to explore attributes relevant to abundance and deficit perspectives. The review of the works using this approach provides an acute view into the process by which Chatman entered and studied various communities using qualitative design.³⁸ Rather than merely naming how abundance and deficit are applied, this analysis describes *and* critiques the selected works in how they employ the concepts of abundance and deficit.

The first element used for this analysis is *design/approach*, or the type and frame of the study. Here, *design/approach* is inclusive of the publics Chatman chose to study, the data collected, and techniques used to analyze the data. The second element is the *researcher role*, which identifies the voice, position, or posture adopted by the researcher in a study. The third element, *theory use*, describes where theoretical application and development as a methodological construct are presented in the analyzed text. Lastly,

³⁶ *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology (JASIST)*, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://asistdl.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/23301643>.

³⁷ This description appears in a footnote of Elfreda A. Chatman, "A Theory of Life in the Round," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 50, no. 3 (1999): 207-217. See also the original article, Elfreda A. Chatman, "The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 47, no. 3 (1996): 193-206.

³⁸ Hamid R. Jamali, "Does Research Using Qualitative Methods (Grounded Theory, Ethnography, and Phenomenology) Have More Impact?" *Library & Information Science Research* 40, no. 3-4 (2018): 201-207.

the fourth and fifth elements, *abundance attributes* and *deficit attributes*, consider the value of the publics being illuminated, highlighting lack as an entry point for study and with resulting findings demonstrating the internal structures within the community under study.

The resulting analysis deconstructs three sample articles representative of Chatman's work over time and type (see Table 1). Each article is representative of a scholarly phase of inquiry, beginning with exploratory, theory application, and theory development. The elements featuring highlights from article text function as descriptive cues in understanding deficit and abundance as they appear in Chatman's research.

ARTICLE 1: "INFORMATION, MASS MEDIA, AND THE WORKING POOR" (1985)

Chatman's early study focuses on the information practices and experiences of women, specifically single mothers at the head of their households, participating in a training institute. Chatman's approach to the study involved a positivistic, objective inquiry into the dominant media sources relied upon by this community of women. Presupposing the dominance of poverty in their lives, she embarked into the field of study with the assumption of passive intake of information, with her study participants relying on television instead of print sources as characteristic of the uneducated poor. The evidence revealed that economic poverty and information poverty are not linked in the everyday information-seeking of the women in her study. They were not, as she initially assumed, "uneducated." She stumbled upon an exploration into the systemic oppression of the marginalized, while keeping information-as-thing a primary variable in investigation.

Chatman notes her objective stance as researcher in the implementation of the interview-based research. This aligns with a post-positivistic view, which brings the notion of scientific rigor to research practice. Methodologically, revelations are contained within the context of source credibility theory and forces a limitation on the naturalistic world of information access and use among the working poor. Taking this route, the subject becomes an object of examination, a regulated entity, and reduced to a formulaic deficit-based population under study.

However, in framing the findings and the subsequent discussion, Chatman questions imposing notions of "deficit" on the community. First, she acknowledges that the population is not devoid of education, describing them as having an average of fourteen years of schooling. Challenging the still-popular myth that poverty in the United States primarily results from poor education, Chatman paints her respondents with a more complex brush, as literate and engaged with the written word. She challenges the notion that they passively consumed all their information through television and movies. This tension between the deficit frameworks that characterized the discourse of the time and the clear evidence of abundance in Chatman's observations created a sort of tightrope that set an early precedent for Chatman's later work in developing and applying

theory. From the vantage point of contemporary examination, Chatman's earlier assertions about the complex knowledge and worlds of the working poor were diminished by what seems to be a concession to the ideologies of her contemporaries. The terminology and use of the term "information poor" to situate the respondents cues the reader to an underlying deficit posture (although this is somewhat attenuated by recognition of the unique character of the women in the study).

ARTICLE 2: "ALIENATION THEORY—APPLICATION OF A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO A STUDY OF INFORMATION AMONG JANITORS" (1990)

Theory application is a core feature of Chatman's work in marginal communities. In her examination of socio-cultural contexts of information for outsider communities, she used theories such as alienation theory to highlight the outsider status of the working poor. For example, Chatman draws on Seeman's alienation framework (which characterizes alienation in terms of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement)³⁹ as a conceptual framework for data collection and analysis.⁴⁰ In one study, Chatman explores the information world of janitors working at a university. Again, the subject is seen as devoid or lacking in the normative information sphere. For this investigation, Chatman posed the following research questions:

Do janitors live in an alienated environment?

1. What are their information-seeking behaviors?
2. What role do the mass media play in their search for meaningful information?
3. What, if any, interpersonal communication channels are available to them?⁴¹

These questions demonstrate a presumption of objectivity, with the goal of creating empirically accurate, definitive descriptions of participants' interactions with information. Such an orientation places Chatman in an unfortunate position that mirrors that of an ethnographic colonizer viewing the "other" and "discovery" through some predetermined set of values external to the participant community. Chatman's use of alienation theory extends this paternalistic perspective. One must ask, alienated from whom and what? The answer lies in her view of the normative world of work, subjectivity, and information. The alignment between alienation theory with concepts like

³⁹ Melvin Seeman, "On the Meaning of Alienation," *American Sociological Review* 24, no. 6 (1959): 783-791.

⁴⁰ Chatman, "Alienation Theory," 356.

⁴¹ Chatman, 358.

powerlessness, meaninglessness, normalcy, isolation, and self-estrangement inevitably frame the information lives of the janitors in terms of deficit.

Chatman suggests that people experiencing alienation are those “...who live in an environment in which they are alienated from each other, who have few, if any, social supports, and who view their world from a hostile, protective stance.”⁴² In applying alienation theory in her study, this statement became providential, a case of “if you look for it, you will find it.” The devaluation of information lives placed in the context of so-called normative information sources, limited the power of the study by reducing the subjects to alienated and marginalized figures dwelling within a robust, normative, elite environment. Chatman does nod to abundance in her research by leaving the library as the primary site of information for different publics and exploring the information world of janitors as a distinct space unto itself. Although Chatman documented aspects of this world in the context of a deficit-based theory shrouded in terms of seclusion and segregation, she was able to locate a culture of its own operating within the context of larger society. And yet, this study ultimately placed markers around the culture while failing to describe the richness within. The reliance on deductively applying alienation theory in this instance made for a total reliance on deficit as a conceptual framing.

ARTICLE 3: “A THEORY OF LIFE IN THE ROUND” (1999)

“A Theory of Life in the Round” represents Chatman’s movement beyond the application of pre-existing theory to the development of new middle range theory in information science. In this study, she focused on a population of women in a maximum-security prison, a cultural sphere that simultaneously exists “outside” of society and within it. Chatman’s scoping of the study—focused on a “localized worldview, centered on everyday concerns,”⁴³ and choice to amplify the voices of the participants—reflects an abundance perspective. Chatman’s openness to what the field revealed in the everyday differentiates this study from her earlier work.

This is not to say that this theory was not informed by previous work. Chatman closely aligned the information behaviors of the imprisoned women to Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis, in which every day social interactions are likened to theatrical performance.⁴⁴ Her proposition that “information is really performance,” rested on the premise of coherent, shared social narratives. Imprisoned women “put on a show,” playing their roles within the boundaries and limitations of their information worlds, forming their own (albeit constricted) realities.

⁴² Chatman, 357.

⁴³ Elfreda A. Chatman “A Theory of Life in the Round,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 50, no. 3 (1999): 215.

⁴⁴ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2008).

Deficit/abundance tensions pervade Chatman's methodological approaches to studying "small worlds" such as prisons. On one hand, Chatman allows us to hear the voices and words of imprisoned women directly. These narratives center the participants and allow them to name and describe their information worlds. Vignettes help clarify the internal cultural mechanisms that construct information in the round. Simultaneously, Chatman's concepts⁴⁵—her definitions and uses of *small world*, *social norms*, *worldview*, and *social types*—suggest a devaluation of the participants' values and information lives. Chatman's theory of the life in the round presumes separation from "normal" existence, and these concepts (as defined) encourage reductive characterizations rather than reflections on the complex nature of outsider information cultures and worlds. By ignoring or devaluing outsider values, they also reinforce the social and political boundaries that create marginalization. Overall, this theory acknowledges the fundamental value of the life in the round, but falls short in its omission of gender and cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

An abundance perspective frees researchers and the communities to examine the contexts and information-lives of those traditionally devalued and marginalized. Outsider communities or groups perceived as devoid of information structures create and sustain rich information environments. Over time, Chatman recognized the possibility of developing theory based on the information environments of outlier communities but was restricted by a discipline that limited information constructs within institutional and cultural media-based frames. This retrospective exploration of Chatman's work sought to clarify her historical role in opening pathways for understanding outsider communities and finding value within them. However, the persistence of deficit terminology found within her work ignored abundance and agency in information spaces in all communities.

As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, my research of the African American informational experience is in the tradition of Elfreda Chatman. My research seeks to examine environments that are not accounted for in theories of information. In a closer examination of her inquiry process in relation to my own, I found it necessary to explore the dimensions of researcher/observer role in examining outsider communities. I see Chatman's approach to the field as a constancy of tensions. I recommend that tensions between abundance and deficit perspectives in LIS research be addressed by first critiquing information research and practices that fail to honor and respect outsider communities. This requires a broader lens that can recognize the richness of diverse

⁴⁵ Paul T. Jaeger and Gary Burnett, *Information Worlds: Behavior, Technology, and Social Context in the Age of the Internet* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203851630>.

information environments and contexts. Secondly, researchers must re-examine the practice of defining communities in terms of lack. The information practices and lives of communities and collectives should be examined on their own terms and according to their own values. Lastly, in the tradition of Chatman (despite the flaws described in this paper), LIS researchers should expand the theoretical landscape to include the fullness of the informational experience of excluded populations.

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Table 1: Overview of Article Examinations

Article	<i>Information, Mass Media, and the Working Poor (1985)</i>	<i>Alienation Theory: Application of a Conceptual Framework to a Study of Information among Janitors (1990)</i>	<i>A Theory of Life in the Round (1999)</i>
Description	Study of women participants in a work training program.	Exploration into the information context of janitors at a southern university.	Examination life experiences of imprisoned women.
Research Intent	Exploratory	Theory Application	Exploratory/Theory Development
Design/Approach	<p><i>Question/Directive:</i> “Investigate the mass media as sources of information in an urban poor working environment and people’s perception of the credibility of sources of information within their everyday reach.” (p. 100)</p> <p><i>Population:</i> Women enrolled in an urban CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) program</p> <p><i>Qualitative-Interview:</i> “23 item interview guide consisting of open-format and fixed format questions” (p.100)</p> <p><i>Respondents:</i> “50 women who were the sole financial support for their families...Black, 60%; White, 26%; Latino, 10%; Other, 4%.” (p. 100)</p>	<p><i>Research Questions:</i> 1. Do janitors live in an alienated environment? 2. What are their information seeking behaviors? 3. What role do the mass media play in their search for meaningful information? 4. What, if any, interpersonal communication channels are available to them? (p. 358)</p> <p><i>Population:</i> Janitors 85 (52; 41 females, 11 males interviewed). All were observed.</p> <p><i>Ethnographic & Interview Guide:</i> Integral aspects of this world...were only obtainable with the ethnographic method.” (p. 357)</p>	<p><i>Research Directive:</i> “explore aspects of the women’s lives that might add another level to my understanding of information poverty.” (p. 207)</p> <p>Population: Women in a maximum-security prison</p> <p><i>Ethnographic/ Interviews:</i> Observation and interviews with 80 imprisoned women</p>

Article	<i>Information, Mass Media, and the Working Poor</i> (1985)	<i>Alienation Theory: Application of a Conceptual Framework to a Study of Information among Janitors</i> (1990)	<i>A Theory of Life in the Round</i> (1999)
Researcher (role, voice, position, posture)	Researcher as outsider. Questions “phrased in an objective manner as possible, without suggesting a particular position.” (p. 100)	Researcher as outside investigator entering into and being immersed in the field of study.	Illuminating voice of respondents. As outsider embedded in study environment. Objectivist.
Theory Use	Review of literature of media use and credibility of sources (Source Credibility) among the working poor.	Alienation theory, “The research literature describes the poor as people who live in an environment in which they are alienated from each other, who have few, if any, social supports, and who view their world from a hostile protective stance.” (p. 358)	Application and extension of Theory of Information Poverty (Chatman, 1992). <i>Life in the Round Theory Development Concepts</i> : “small world, social norms, worldview, and social types.” (p. 213)
Abundance Attributes	Findings suggest “population does not show itself to be living in a restricted, impoverished information world” (p. 108) “Although they are poor, they are not uneducated.” (p. 109)	Discovery of new ways of studying information outside of libraries. Expressed clarity in determining the how the information environment presents itself.	The recognition of the world existing among imprisoned people. “localized worldview, centered on everyday concerns. In this world a paramount role of immediate others is to shape standards of behavior.” (p. 215)
Deficit Attributes	Redefining of what poor means in urban populations.	Imposition and application of Alienation Theory on the information environment of the population under study.	Limitations of life in the round. Prescriptive definitions of environment, ignoring culture.

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