Elfreda Chatman’s theory of life in the round and Reijo Savolainen’s Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) model are my choices for comparison because of the affinity I have experienced prior to taking this course with the types of participants studied. I was intrigued by the similarity of Chatman’s descriptions of the lives of women prisoners documented in the mid-nineties to my own observations in the late seventies as a GED instructor at Leavenworth State Penitentiary for Women in Leavenworth, KS. It seems that little has changed over the last twenty-five years for the inmates in terms of roles, behaviors, or expectations. Savolainen’s initial ELIS work focused on information seeking behavior of teachers and industrial workers. Being a teacher, I was able to relate to the findings and enjoyed reading the thirty-two-page study. Hence, the rationale for the choice of comparisons for the purpose of this assignment is both personal and familiar.

Chatman and Savolainen were contemporaries and their research findings concerning the information behavior of ordinary people and marginalized populations were published in the 1990s. This period is important because studies began to focus less on job-related information seeking and more on “nonwork information needs, seeking, and use” (Savolainen, 1995, p. 259). While Chatman’s studies focused on marginalized populations such as women prisoners, janitors, and aging women, Savolainen’s research included middle-class professionals and industrial workers. Their collected research attempts to study groups of individuals by the “roles” (Case, 2002, p. 259) imposed upon them by the general population. It is important to understand that just because these groups of people are clustered together for “the purpose of analysis and planning” (Case, 2002, p.259), the imposed categories are not necessarily real and the diversity of the individuals and their perspectives are sometimes lost in the results. Chatman
and Savolainen approach their research using different metatheories but their fieldwork utilizes similar methodologies, i.e. extensive interviews with small populations of interviewees.

Chatman’s theory of life in the round represents a culmination of research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s focusing on “understanding information behavior through the social factors influencing that behavior” (Chatman, 2000, p. 1). In a keynote address at the Information Seeking in Context (ISIC) 2000 Conference, she traced the history of prior studies and their evolution “into three new middle-range theories that better explained her lifelong observations of information seeking by various populations in an everyday context” (Case, 2002, p. 75).

Chatman’s purpose in her ethnographic study of 80 female inmates in a maximum-security prison in Neuse City, NC, “was to explore aspects of women’s lives that might add another level of understanding to her understanding of information poverty” (Chatman, 1999, p. 207). This study was an attempt to look at another homogeneous population to determine if the four key concepts of information poverty: secrecy, deception, risk-taking and situational relevance that were observed as “self-protective behaviors during the information-seeking process” (Case, 2002, p. 76) in her studies of janitors, single mothers and aging women, would be replicated with a prison population.

The concepts of small world, social norms, social types, and worldview originate from other sociological theories but form the basis of Chatman’s theory on “life in the round”. (Fisher, Erdelez, & McKechnie, 2005, p.80) According to Chatman, “life in the round is a public form of life in which things are implicitly understood” (Chatman, 1999, p.212). As this relates to a prison, Chatman found “an information world that was functioning quite well” because of a shared reality. The small worldness of the prison provides a certain degree of security and protection to the inmates who seem “to reshape their own private views in order to embody the
norms of prison. It is a lifestyle with an enormous degree of imprecision, yet it is this inexactitude that provides an acceptable level of certainty” (Chatman, 1999, p. 207). Information sharing in this small world environment is controlled by the “insiders” who have the knowledge and sense of self to enhance their social type or role in this “community of others” and “who are most concerned with keeping this world in all its roundness” (Chatman, 1999, p. 212). Inmates are not actively seeking information about their situations rather they are relying on personal experiences or on hearsay from someone who is an “insider”, one possessing the necessary knowledge for existing in the defined world.

Savolainen studies a different kind of world than the small world presented in Chatman’s research. His world is viewed through the lens of habitus, “a determined social and cultural system of thinking” (Savolainen, 1995, p.261) that Pierre Bourdieu developed in the 1980s.

Habitus forms the base on which one’s way of life is organized. Habitus renders a general direction to choices made in everyday life by indicating which choices are natural or desirable in relation to one’s social class or cultural group. (Savolainen, 1995, p. 262).

The terms “way of life”, or the order of things, and “mastery of life”, or keeping things in order, provide the framework of his research investigating nonwork information seeking in the “way of life” of twenty-two Finnish middle-class teachers and working class industrial laborers. “The concept of ELIS refers to elements which people employ to orient themselves in daily life or to solve problems” (Savolainen, 1995, p. 267) outside of their work environment.

Information seeking is critical to the definition of “mastery of life” because it aims to resolve issues of problem solving between “how things are at the moment” and “how they should be”
Fisher et al. (2005). This uncertainty or gap in meaning initiates the information seeking process and helps define Savolainen’s ELIS model of four major types of mastery of life behaviors as they relate to media use: optimistic-cognitive, pessimistic-cognitive, defensive-affective, and pessimistic-affective. He discovered relatively few class differences in most aspects of life-style and found that social class did not necessarily determine the type of media orientation of his informants (Savolainen, 1995, p. 279). His “model suggests that ‘way of life’ (‘order of things’) and ‘mastery of life’ (‘keeping things in order’) determine each other” Fisher et al. (2005).

“Way of life”, operationally, includes how people use their leisure time versus work time, how money is spent on goods and services, and what people find pleasant or fun.

Both Chatman and Savolainen’s research is significant in their contributions to the study of everyday life information behavior as it relates to the theory of information poverty with marginalized populations and the part the user plays in nonwork information-seeking processes. Evidence of the influence of social capital and the quality of information gained by the user cuts across both studies. Observing users in context or in the situation of their social environment is common to both investigations with an emphasis on socioeconomic status as a possible determiner of heavy use of electronic media for leisure and information acquisition. Chatman proposes that the meaning of life for women inmates is their small world reality of life in the round that provides stability and protection. Whereas, Savolainen’s small world balances “the mastery of life” and “the way of life” for different classes of workers making choices in their daily world outside of work.

Chatman and Savolainen’s combined research has provided solid frameworks for future studies of life in the round and the ELIS model with various other groups besides marginalized populations. Chatman’s work in particular could be used to identify stimuli
that would prompt members of a small world to consider seeking information outside their known environment (Case 2002).

The ELIS “model could also be developed by elaborating the concept of “mastery of life” and validating the types of “mastery of life”. Additionally, people’s perceptions of their information-related competencies could be investigated empirically and compared to ‘mastery of life’ types” (Savolainen, 2002, p. 224).

It seems logical to assume that “the average citizen will continue to settle his or her problems in ways that speak to their way of life” and the “challenge is to discover what issues are most critical to this way of life and in what areas research needs to done to help facilitate it” (Chatman, 2000, p.12).
References


