Homeless in Seattle

by Team 10

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Assignment 2: IB Assessment—Literature Review and

Field Work Summary

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LITERATURE REVIEW

In this information behavior study, our group examines the everyday information resources, needs, and behaviors of the homeless. Literature research has led us to many key resources. Important literature on our topic includes *Everyday Information Needs and Information Sources of Homeless Parents*, *The Homeless and Information Needs and Services*, and *Are the economically poor information poor? Does the digital divide affect the homeless and access to information?* by Julie Hersberger, and *The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders* and *Framing Social Life in Theory and Research* by Elfreda Chatman.

The fundamental concepts in the literature show that a study must have a definition of homelessness and information poverty, address the everyday information needs and services of the homeless, identify misconceptions about how the homeless view and use information, and discuss information behaviors and barriers for the homeless.

The homeless are a growing population in the United States. As the gap between the wealthy and poor increases, more people find themselves overwhelmed and displaced without a permanent residence, financial stability, or social networks, such as family, friends, and/or public assistance. Generally, homelessness in America is a result of unaffordable housing, family fragmentation, domestic violence, mental illness, health problems, addictions, unemployment, or a combination of several of these issues[1] (Hersberger, 2001, p. 119).

Research has concluded that homeless "people in their everyday lives are assessing their information needs in order to maintain or improve their everyday living situations" (Hersberger, 2001, p.120). Chatman, who originated the theory of information poverty after posing the question, "What constitutes a poverty lifestyle" (Chatman, 2000, p. 4), found after many studies on marginalized populations that instead of sharing information, the constituents of the population often withheld information from one another during the information seeking process. The key components Chatman identified in information poverty were secrecy, deception, risk-taking, and situational relevance

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[1] Other commonly cited factors include: gentrification of urban areas, cutbacks in aid resources for the poor and homeless, and minimum wages that don't match the cost of living.

(Chatman, 1996, p.194). Interestingly, Hersberger found in a number of studies specifically on the homeless that being homeless does not necessarily mean that one is information poor or that the homeless view themselves as information impoverished. Quite a few homeless people have some level of education, such as high school, college, trade, or military training. Most have access to such technology as television, computers, and phones, and they have resources and services in the forms of libraries, churches, shelters, nonprofits, and government-run agencies. But the exact issues that contribute to their homeless status, as listed above, also restrict them from utilizing information in a way that addresses their needs. This results in what Chatman identifies as the "outsider" status. The homeless, a marginalized population, becomes looked upon as "other", which is characterized by avoidance/use issues due to lack of trust and is fueled by stereotypes of the homeless and negative perceptions of the poor.

While the homeless may not utilize formal information networks to its capacity, the homeless do have extensive social networks that they rely on for everyday information. These resources range from shelter/soup kitchen staff, church communities, health workers, and other homeless–people involved in their everyday life. In many of the studies, the participants were homeless people that self-identified their everyday information needs. While homeless people often freely discussed their everyday life problems, they "were not always able to easily link their needs to information sources that could help resolve the need" (Hersberger, 2001, p.132). Likewise, a large number of information resources are not necessarily useful to homeless. For example, finding a computer and utilizing it may take more time and effort than to ask someone where to locate food or shelter.

Another common problem is that places that accept, cater to, and are frequented by homeless offer limited information regarding everyday homeless needs and concerns. There are not many holistic information resources dealing with all the needs of the homeless. The homeless are often forced to deal with under-funded, poorly organized, or limited outreach programs and services that treat urgent, not comprehensive, needs.

As shown, some intriguing results emerge when Hersberger applies Chatman's framework to her research. Across the literature, we see that the dynamics of the information needs and behavior of the homeless are complex. Next, our study discusses

how our own fieldwork relates to the conclusions of Hersberger and Chatman when we apply the framework of information poverty to our study of the homeless in Seattle.

METHODOLOGY

We followed a qualitative approach in our research methodology, gathering data to answer questions about the information behavior in the everyday life of the homeless. Our research was guided by Elfreda Chatman's Theory of Information Poverty (Chatman, 1996, p. 194-98), which consists of four key concepts: deception, risk-taking, secrecy and situational relevance; and the following six propositional statements:

1. People who are defined as information poor perceive themselves to be devoid of any sources that might help them.

2. Information poverty is partially associated with class distinction. That is, the condition of information poverty is influenced by outsiders who withhold privileged access to information.

3. Information poverty is determined by self-protective behaviors which are used in response to social norms.

4. Both secrecy and deception are self-protecting mechanisms due to a sense of mistrust regarding the interest or ability of others to provide useful information.

5. A decision to risk exposure about our true problems is often not taken due to a perception that negative consequences outweigh benefits.

6. New knowledge will be selectively introduced into the information world of poor people. A condition that influences this process is the relevance of that information in response to everyday problems and concerns.

Our methodology consisted of participant observation and survey. Seven surveys were conducted both on the streets and in homeless services centers. One lengthy observation was conducted at a day center, which provides homeless and low-income services. The surveys lasted approximately 15 minutes with questions ranging from where people go to get information, how they seek information, and how they share information. These questions elicited brief and lengthy responses. Most respondents on the streets were reticent and wary when first approached but became friendly once they were offered food or small change. The observers volunteered at the center providing

food, clothing and answering questions while observing. They interacted extensively with the clientele for 2 to 3 hours. While the day center was open to both homeless and low-income populations, the observers focused on the homeless at the center who were identified as such by the staff. A staff person at the center facilitated the survey conducted at the center and the respondents there were also very approachable. Further observation at other locations and more surveys will be conducted.

Results demonstrate that the homeless exchange primarily basic needs information with shelter workers and other homeless. If they are new to the streets, they are more reticent about sharing information and asking questions while those who have been on the streets longer share information more willingly. They do not feel that they lack information but often that they have too much general information and not enough of the right information about specific services. They often do not want to appear homeless due to stigmas associated with being homeless. They depend more on social networks and informal sources, like fellow homeless and shelter workers, for information rather than more formal sources, such as libraries or outreach sources, where they feel like they cannot relate to the staff or the Internet. They also expressed distrust of some shelters and service centers, stating that staff was not "sincere" and did not really want to help them.

FINDINGS

Everyday information behavior patterns among the homeless vary substantially according to the individual's background and personal information needs. In our fieldwork, behaviors emerged both supporting and contradicting the six propositional statements in Elfreda Chatman's Theory of Information Poverty (Chatman, 1996, p. 194-98). The information behavior of the homeless is primarily focused on seeking information to meet basic needs, such as food, shelter, clothing, and medical care. They use a variety of both formal and informal information resources and behaviors depending on their personal circumstances of life on the streets.

Chatman's first proposition posits that the information poor perceive themselves as devoid of information sources that might help them (Chatman, 1996, p. 197). Hersberger both agrees and disagrees with this statement and claims that most homeless feel they have plenty of access to information and are often overwhelmed with how much

information they have (Hersberger, 2002, p. 57). Our findings, like Hersberger's, found that the homeless felt that there was plenty of information available; however, most felt that there needed to be organization of the information in one place where they could go. One survey respondent stated, "I need someplace to figure out where to get all the services. That's hard to figure out."

When comparing our results against Chatman's second proposition concerning class distinction (Chatman, 1996, p. 197), our findings suggest that most individuals withholding valuable information are not outsiders, but rather the homeless themselves. The homeless who have been on the streets for a long time withhold information from those who are new to the streets, in part because those new to the streets are reticent about asking information. Although this may seem strange, it is not an intentional practice. These findings support Hersberger's idea that those who were new to poverty felt like information outsiders (Hersberger, 2002, p. 57).

Chatman's third proposition links self-protective behavior to information poverty (Chatman, 1996, p. 197). Hersberger showed mixed results and claimed that when the information was urgently needed, the homeless would willingly give up personal information; however, when prompted by individuals such as researchers, they tended to be rather guarded (Hersberger, 2002, p. 57). Our findings suggest that when a basic need such as clothing, food, shelter, and medical care is in question the homeless are very willing to share personal information. The third proposition is similar in scope to Chatman's fourth proposition, which claims that secrecy and deception are self protecting mechanisms, but the fourth proposition claims this is a result of mistrust of others' ability to provide useful information (Chatman, 1996, p. 197). When we identified deception in our findings, it was primarily peer-to-peer deception as a defense mechanism. For example, one respondent intentionally withheld information from his peers about a clothing service because he feared overuse would reduce his benefit. There was mistrust of some shelter workers, with one respondent saying that he only frequents certain shelters because he does not feel like the workers at all shelters "are sincere and really want to help me," but that did not lead to deception in his behavior. Hersberger identified similar deception in her study of shelter residents. Hersberger wrote that "shelter

residents were seen as information sources as long as they were not competing for the same limited resources" (Hersberger, 2001, p.134).

The fifth proposition states that true problems are not often met because negative consequences outweigh benefits (Chatman, 1996, p. 194, 197-98). Our findings do not support Chatman's proposition. Again, we found the homeless willing to share information in order to meet basic needs. For instance, an individual at a day center openly spoke with another man about his injured leg. The other man suggested a clinic and a transportation provider that would take him to the clinic. This suggests that the urgency of the need is directly linked with how the homeless share information with each other and information providers. Chatman's sixth and final proposition claims that new knowledge will be introduced if it is relevant to everyday problems and benefits (Chatman, 1996, p. 198). Our research supported Chatman's proposition and like Hersberger found that most of our respondents felt that, although they had information resources, they were of no value because they did not know how to use the resources.

SUMMARY

While our findings both agreed and disagreed with Chatman's six propositions, what we found to be most important was the status of the current information needs of the homeless in Seattle. For instance, the homeless believe that there is a generous amount of information available to them. The crux of the homeless' information poverty is in how to access the information. The homeless tend to keep valuable information from one another unintentionally, unless a peer urgently needs that information. Although many information resources are available to them by information providers, such as computers at the local public library, most homeless people do not actually use such resources. Coupled with this fact is that information providers do not have an organized system that allows the homeless to seek information in one location. Therefore, the Seattle homeless must struggle with both peers and information providers alike in order to attain valuable information.

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Survey Form

Interviewee Code:
Place of Interview:
Date:
Interviewer:
Length of Interview:

Hi! My name is _____. I'm from the Information School at the University of Washington. I'm asking people how they share information and socialize here at this place. I have few questions that will take about 5-10 minutes. All questions are optional. Would you like to participate?

**You'll have to select the phrasing of the questions based on the answer to #1.

1. Do you come to this place for information?
     1) If no, where do you go for information?

2. How long have you been coming here/going to this place?

3. How did you learn about this place?

4. How often do you go here/there for information?
     1) Daily
     2) 2-3x/week
     3) Weekly
     4) 2-3x/month
     5) Monthly
     6) 2-6x/year
     7) Yearly

5. What times of day do you come here/go there?
     1) Morning
     2) Afternoon
     3) Evening
     4) Late night

6. What time do you arrive here/there?

7. What time do you leave here/there?

8. How long do you usually spend here/there?

9. Do you have food and beverages here/there?

10. What do you do each time you come here/go there (role)?

11. Do you have family or friends who come/go with you?
    1) If yes:
       i. how old are they?
       ii. What is their gender?
       iii. What is their relationship to you (Family? Friend?)
       iv. How long have you known them?

12. Can anyone come/go here/there, i.e., is it "open" to anyone?
    1) Yes
    2) No
       i. If "no," under what circumstances are people not allowed here?

13. How many people are usually here/there?
    1) 2-5
    2) 6-10
    3) 11-15
    4) 16-20
    5) 21-25
    6) 26-50
    7) 51-99
    8) 100+

14. How well do you know the people here/there?
    1) You don't recognize
    2) You recognize but don't know names
    3) You know first name
    4) You know well

15. Do you see or interact with any of these same people, other than the

ones you came/go with, in other settings?
- 1) No
- 2) Yes
    - i. Where?

16. Do you have access to a phone?
- 1) No
- 2) Yes
    - i. Where?
    - ii. Do you talk with any of these people on the phone?

17. Do you have access to a computer?
- 1) No
- 2) Yes
    - i. Where?
    - ii. *Do you talk with any of these people online (email/IM)?*

18. What do you like about this place? *[Do not read list; circle responses that fit best & specify]*
- 1) Making connections with people [people]
- 2) Diversity of people and ideas [people]
- 3) People watching [people]
- 4) Similar beliefs/opinions [people]
- 5) Common interests [people]
- 6) Getting questions answered [information]
- 7) Learning new things [information]
- 8) Resources [information]
- 9) Other
    - i. Atmosphere/environment/ambience [place]
    - ii. Amenities [place]
    - iii. Convenient [place]

19. What kinds of things do you learn at this place? *[Do not read list; circle responses that fit best & specify]*
- 1) What's happening in the area
- 2) What's happening in the world
- 3) Who is doing what
- 4) Things about places (what restaurant or store is good or bad)
- 5) Things that you need to learn more about
- 6) Things for self-improvement

7) Things about other people's thoughts and opinions
8) Things to apply to daily living
9) Other

20. When you are at this place, how are you most likely to encounter information? *[do not read list; circle responses that fit best]*
   1) Overhearing a conversation
   2) Conversing with someone who works there
   3) Conversing with someone who does not work there
   4) Reading posted material
   5) Observing people or reading others comments
   6) Print material
   7) Sermon
   8) Media
   9) Other

21. How much of what you learn at this place occurs by accident or chance?
   1) 20%
   2) 50%
   3) 90%

22. What kinds of everyday information are you interested in encountering here?

23. How useful is what you learn at this place
   1) Not Applicable
   2) Not Useful
   3) Somewhat Useful
   4) Very Useful
   5) Can't Do Without

24. Is the information you encounter mostly trivial or good for making important or big decisions?
   1) Trivial
   2) Big Decision
   3) Small Decision
   4) All
   5) Other

25. What would make it easier for you and others to share useful information at this place?

26. What are the drawbacks to getting information at this place?

27. How important is this place as a means to get help for information about everyday life?
     1) Most important
     2) Somewhat important
     3) Not very important
     4) Not important

28. What is your next best place for information?

29. Is there anything you'd like to add about what you've just told me?

30. Gender

31. Age

32. *THANK YOU!*