

The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders

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Drawing upon a series of studies that examines the information world of poor people, the author discovers four critical concepts that serve as the basis for defining an impoverished life-world. These concepts are risk-taking, secrecy, deception, and situational relevance. Moving back and forth among the worlds of janitors, single mothers, and an aging population, the author develops a conceptual framework that links the world of the information poor—the outsiders—with a world of insiders. Paradoxically, the author finds that the very existence of two worlds is in itself a hindrance to information seeking and sharing behaviors. Insiders, because of their status, reinforce information poverty by neglecting to accept sources of information not created by themselves. The author's findings thus indicate that the world of insiders is one in which outsiders are not sought for information and advice and is a world in which norms and mores define what is important and what is not.

Introduction

As researchers who wish to develop theory, we must identify problems central to our field. The basis for this argument is that once these problems have been identified, we might be led to the formulation of conceptual issues that underline these problems. This strategy is commonly referred to as the inductive method. Its primary contribution to theory is that it forces us to think in a systematic manner about philosophical concerns. More generally, inductive reasoning normally occurs when members of a discipline have a less clear notion regarding conceptual frameworks that are readily identified within that discipline.

As library and information scientists, we do not have a tradition of focusing on normative problems in which we can approach a line of inquiry with some measure of certainty. We cannot be sure that our areas are well defined and that our problems are important. We have no

central theory or body of interrelated theories we can view as "middle range."¹

In light of this discussion, it would appear we are currently focused on the application of conceptual frameworks rather than on the generation of specific theories. Drawing on bits and pieces from a variety of sources, we construct propositional statements that appear to have some bearing on problems arising from the occupational work we perform.

Although there is some discussion among scholars that grounded theory leads the inductive process, this argument has not been adequately reported. For example, for a theory to have application to empirical inquiries, it must be grounded in *some* knowledge base. As we draw from this base of previous studies, we theorize about phenomena being currently experienced. Moreover, we routinely apply intellectual strategies as we attempt to make sense out of the data being uncovered. It is the process of immersion, the testing of previous assumptions, and the modification of those assumptions that are *significant activities* which ultimately lead to theory building.

In a study I recently conducted, for example, I applied *social network theory* to a study of aging women. I chose this particular theory because of its emphasis on mutual support and resource exchange. I suspected that a community of aging women would lead to opportunities that would allow for information exchanges dealing with concerns of common interest. I also thought that the networks of these women would permit emotional support. As will become apparent during this discussion, the theory needed adjustment in light of the data that were discovered.

As most scholars know, theory construction begins

¹ According to R. K. Merton (1959, p. 108), theories of the middle range are limited in scope. For example, "reference groups and social mobility . . . role-conflict . . ." In his opinion, these theories also "involve abstractions, of course, but abstracts not so far removed from the date of sociological observations. Such theories . . . consist of sets of relatively simple ideas, which link together a limited number of facts about the structure and functions of social formations and suggest further observations."

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with a fundamental question that directs our search into a body of literature. In my case, an original question pertained to the notion of information poverty. Early in my research, I was influenced by scholars who made the argument that economic poverty was linked to information poverty. Over the course of my inquiries, however, I discovered that this linkage is not necessarily true. But, those findings did become the reference points for my research question; namely, what factors are present that would account for an information-poverty lived-experience? Needing to find plausible answers, I used a number of conceptual frameworks, including gratification theory, alienation theory, and diffusion theory. I applied theory-driven research that yielded four essential concepts that, taken together, appear to act like a "DNA factor" for information poverty.

I should mention that I did not begin my inquiries with these concepts in mind. Rather, the findings reveal that the concepts are components of my studies that have not yet been resolved. The concepts—*deception*, *risk-taking*, *secrecy*, and *situational relevance*—were not part of the theories but came about through anomalies. Because anomalies are so important in the emergence of these concepts, I will discuss them briefly. The anomaly is like the grain of sand that gets into the system and causes such irritation and refocusing of energy that something new gets produced. This is what happened in my work, and I will use my experience to show how anomalies lead to development of my four concepts.

In theory construction, anomalies present intellectual dilemmas for scholars. The dilemmas occur because a researcher is aware that something is going on and that patterns of behavior indicate unexpected relationships. In the case of the aging women, the realization that the original conceptual framework has limiting power regarding the new discovery forced a reexamination of previously held notions and a search for new meanings. This is not an easy task. One difficulty lies in the investment in intellectual effort required to provide new understandings while approaching the research experience with some measure of confidence. So it was the presence of anomalies that led to the development of my four concepts. Using three previous studies, I will illustrate how these concepts led to my convictions regarding a taxonomy for an impoverished information world. If my argument is valid, then the significance of its contribution might be an important one for studies of information-seeking behaviors within the life-worlds of poor people. I will begin my discussion by placing my argument within the bigger picture, i.e., the sociology of knowledge.

Insiders/Outsiders

Implied throughout this discussion is the difference between insiders and outsiders regarding studies of information. A body of work within the sociology of knowledge is that of insiders/outsiders and what it means in

light of knowledge awareness, acquisition, definition, and use.

In sharp contrast to an insider's knowledge of worldview, an outsider lives in a stratified life-world (Lindbeck & Snower, 1988). For instance, an element paramount in the literature is the notion of localized integration. That is, insiders' lived-experiences are shaped by the fact that they share a common cultural, social, religious, etc., perspective. It is these common experiences that provide expected norms of behavior and ways to approach the world. They also define those things that are important to pay attention to and those things that are not.

Concepts related to this phenomenon include "egoculture" (Goodman & Goodman, 1989), "ethnocentrism" (Schopmeyer & Bradley, 1993), and "exclusivism" (Oommen, 1986). What these terms imply is that some members of our society are acting appropriately ("insiders") whereas others ("outsiders") are somehow deviating from the collective standards (Becker, 1973).

As we approach this debate, however, a consistent finding is the basic question: *Is it necessary to be an insider to understand another's lived-experiences* (Latour, 1981)? This is a fundamental question as it provides a basis in which to explore why outsiders are viewed with such suspicion and why there seems to be so little margin with outsiders for things that, in an insider world, are taken for granted. Merton's observation that "Negro sociologists were in large part expected to study problems of Negro life . . . just as women sociologists were expected to study problems of women" (1972, p. 13) feeds into this notion.

The idea that things can only be understood by other insiders may explain why there are informational barriers between these two worlds. A reason might be a doubt that insiders have regarding the ability of outsiders to understand their world. It seems then, that in addition to an insulated, small worldview, the sense that outsiders cannot comprehend a world different from their own leads to a condition of secrecy and protection.

Significantly, what this means in light of information acquisition and use is that insiders shield themselves from needed resources. This finding is particularly startling since insiders believe these resources are held by outsiders. For instance, in a study of welfare rights women, West (1978) discovered that, "the major dilemma for the "insiders" is the conflict of two needs: (1) resources of the "outsiders" and (2) remaining exclusive and apart to protect their autonomy and political control within the movement organization."

No serious discussion about insiders/outsiders is completed without an examination of the major contribution Merton made. In his seminal article, "Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge" (1972), Merton argues that a central theme of this debate is the issue of accessibility and knowledge acquisition. Said another way, insiders claim privileged access

to certain kinds of knowledge. That is, only insiders can truly understand the social and information worlds of other insiders. Although this knowledge is narrow in scope, it serves to insulate and protect the worldview of insiders from contamination by outsiders. Outsiders, on the other hand, also claim access to new knowledge. Their claim, however, rests on their perception that, because they are part of the large society, they have a more cosmopolitan view of the world and, therefore, easy access to its resources.

The idea of *meaning*, or how people use information to reshape, redefine, or reclaim their social reality, played against the background of insider/outsider is a central concern driving my research efforts. Another basic premise is a belief that, within this polarized intellectual structure, there are issues such as secrecy, deception, and "privileged access" to certain kinds of knowledge. This idea stems from a phenomenon reported in the literature implying that there is a consortium of opinion regarding what is important to know and what is irrelevant. Adherence to this philosophy is instrumental in keeping privileged information from outsiders except at great risk and personal cost (Merton, 1972, p. 11).

To recapitulate the principal contributions made thus far: other things aside, it has led to a curious situation in which an examination of knowledge need and use is significantly influenced by our identification of insider or outsider.

In support of this discussion and the usefulness of the findings, Merton (1972, p. 9) observes that

Especially in times of great social change, precipitated by acute social conflict and attended by much cultural disorganization and reorganization, the perspectives provided by the various sociologies of knowledge bear directly upon problems agitating the society. It is then that differences in the values, commitments, and intellectual orientations of conflicting groups become deepened into basic cleavages, both social and cultural.

Secrecy

What are some characteristics of this discussion that have general applicability to studies of information and poverty? For one, the insiders/outside literature suggests that knowledge about our personal experiences is *secret* information. There isn't a discussion of situational relevance because this concept does not appear in the sociological literature. However, one can assume that the relevance of information to a group might be suspect if it originates from outside the group.

The purpose of secrecy appears to be to protect ourselves from unwanted intrusion from *whatever* source. According to Simmel (1950, p. 330), the secret, "in this sense, the hiding of realities by negative or positive means, is one of man's greatest achievements." A plausi-

ble explanation is the desire we all have to claim an intimate or private dimension of life that is uniquely ours.

Bok (1983, p. 5) defines anything as a secret if its intent is intentional concealment. She states, "it may be shared with no one, or confided on condition that it goes no farther." "However, the overall intent of secret information is the idea that it will protect a person from unwanted intrusion into private space. As well, it conveys a secret-laden way of experiencing reality (that is knowledge about one's life) that is primarily inaccessible to others" (Luhmann, 1989, p. 131). Said another way, concealed information is intended as a separation mechanism in which a person or select group of persons view themselves as ultimate insiders.

Ironically, secret information also includes the element of *control*. Ericson (1989, p. 208) indicates that control has an influence on the communication process. The closer the affinities and involvements people have with each other, the greater their need to protect their secretive life-worlds. In everyday life, a secret might be viewed as that which, if disclosed, carries an enormous amount of risk. For example, with "trusted" others, such as family members, we might hide financial problems. Why? We withhold the information to preserve our autonomy and to give ourselves some fundamental say on our personal lives (Redlinger & Johnston, 1980, p. 387). The notion that secrecy might be shared, but that this sharing is confined to a narrow and confined insider membership, is supported by Rigney (1979, p. 52). He observes that, "the mechanisms of secrecy are all the more complex as the number of insiders grows larger . . . the probability of disclosure increases with every increase in the number of secrets shared."

Secrets provide a solemn view of information acquisition and use. The point is that, in secrecy, the objective is to guard against disclosure; consequently, we simply cease to be receptive to advice or information. It seems that the extraordinary power of secrecy is that it is *not* to inform about our true state of affairs. Even in situations in which informing might lead to assistance, sharing is intended to control as little as possible. In this case, a person with a secret hopes that the incomplete or untrue information given would take care of the problem, thus shutting off need for further disclosure.

Deception

A second factor associated with information poverty is *deception*. According to Goffman (1974), deception is falsehood intended by persons not taken in by their own fabrication (p. 112).² Bok (1983) raises the interesting

² For a thorough and thought-provoking discussion dealing with the notion of deception, see Goffman's *Stigma* (1963), *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), and *Relations in Public* (1971). For a delightful "outsiders" look at Goffman's influence on students of secrecy and role distance, see Marx's "Role Models and Role Distance: A Remembrance of Erving Goffman" (1984).

idea that confusion exists regarding the difference between secrecy and deception. She argues that since all deception involves keeping something secret, the confusion is understandable. Important to this discussion is her opinion that, "while all deception requires secrecy, all secrecy is not meant to deceive" (p. 7).

I suggest that deception is a deliberate attempt to play-act, that is, to engage in activities in which our personal reality is consciously being distorted. It is a process meant to hide our true condition by giving false and misleading information. What this does, of course, is shrink the possibility of receiving useful information. The fundamental result of deception leads to a remarkably precarious position in which information sought is irrelevant.

Although the link between deception and information acquisition has not been addressed in the literature, the impression given is interesting. A summarization of this body of work falls into three broad categories: Research dealing with sexual abuse of children (Mikkelsen, Guthiel, & Emens, 1992), victims of wife assault (Dutton and Hemphill, 1992), and information deception as discussed under manipulation theory. The works include the self in everyday reality (Rosie, 1993; Jacobs, 1992), governmental deception (Doyle, 1992; Bordua, 1991), and professions and ethics (Nolan, 1991; Solovey & Duncan, 1992; Friedman, 1992).

The contribution these works make is to allow deception, like secrecy, to be examined within a sociology of knowledge. One primary issue has to do with information need and factors that *hinder* persons from making use of relevant knowledge that, in many cases, is not only public (that is, known) but also accessible.

It was the populations I described and the anomalies such as the one I just identified that led to my development of the four concepts and their subsequent propositions. What proof do I have that my research has yielded a conceptual framework for describing information poverty? To answer that, let us start by addressing the element of risk-taking.

Risk-Taking

A principle component affecting the information-seeking and sharing behaviors process is *risk-taking*. In general, the purpose of secrecy and deception is to protect someone at risk or someone who perceives that revealing information about oneself is potentially dangerous. The ultimate end of both concepts, therefore, is self-protection.

In this light, Goffman (1974) asks, "Where does one find situations in which reduced information must be relied upon?" (pp. 448-449). My answer is that it lies with our perception that to be an outsider necessitates heightened self-protective behavior. In doing my research, it became clear that an assumption I had about my respondent's life-worlds needed to be abandoned. I assumed

that—at least among themselves—they would exhibit characteristics that could identify them as *insiders*. As my findings will later reveal, this was not the case. The results, however, provide significant support to the roles that self-protection and risk play in information poverty.

Risk-taking is borrowed from the diffusion literature in which the concept of relative advantage³ is discussed. In that context, it was examined as an attribute affecting the acceptance or rejection of an innovation. That is, we consider the acceptance of an innovation based on our perception of whether it is worthwhile or not. It does not seem to merit consideration if, weighed against personal or economic cost, the result would be negative.

It is this notion of *cost* that makes risk-taking an attractive concept for studies of information and poverty. As applied here, risk refers not only to whether or not an idea is accepted, but, more importantly, if we should even consider *the possibility*. Thus, in everyday discourse, for people to benefit from information received from outsiders, there needs to be some aspect of trust associated with the source. Otherwise, why should we run the risk of telling others about our private life? Exploring the truth of outside claims, however, is not always feasible, particularly if the receiver of the information is already predisposed to skepticism and if the other's claim to knowledge is not readily accessible to individual plausibility testing. For example, Wilson (1983, p. 141) acknowledges that, "a single unhappy experience with a lawyer or plumber may cause us to distrust all lawyers and all plumbers, and a single shocking story told by a friend may have the same effect."

What then constitutes a trustworthy source which might provide a situation supportive of information sharing? According to Wilson (1983, p. 15), it is a person who is honest, careful about claims, and disinclined to deceive. These attributes find convincing evidence in studies that focus on opinion leaders. Findings from my own studies,⁴ for example, revealed that opinion leaders were sought by other respondents because people trusted them. In a study of technological change, Rogers and Beal (1957-1958) observed that opinion leaders were positive influences in the acceptance of change because they were effective communicators of the need for change and because they conveyed it in a way in which their claims could be trusted. Lindstrom's (1958) study of a rural Japanese community also found that respondents were willing to take a chance on the acceptance of innovative farming practices on condition that some

³ For several studies dealing with relative advantage, see for examples, Lindstrom's "Diffusion of Agricultural and Home Economics Practices in a Japanese Rural Community"; Everett M. Rogers and F. Floyd Shoemaker's, *Communication of Innovations*; Frank Cancian's, "Stratification and Risk-Taking: A Theory Tested on Agricultural Innovation."

⁴ See for examples, *The Diffusion of Information among the Working Poor*, (Chatman, 1983) and "Opinion Leadership, Poverty, and Information Sharing," (Chatman, 1987).

marked degree of trustworthiness was evident. The author found that risk-taking rests on two factors. First, the advisors advocating the practices were trusted insiders. Second, they were perceived to be worthy of belief because they had proven themselves to be reliable sources of new information.

Thus, in everyday life, for people to benefit from information received from outsiders, there needs to be trust associated with this process. What appears to be conditional influences of information poverty is poor people's desperation to shield the real state of need they are experiencing. I suspect that this is due to their perception that it is too costly to themselves to share and because networks of trust between themselves and others have not provided trustworthy opportunities.

If we were to think about a situation in which a person was in true information need and that need was not being shared (primarily due to self-protecting behaviors), it is reasonable to assume the person lives in an impoverished life-world.

Theory Development

As I implied earlier in this article, a characteristic factor of studies I conducted is the interplay between conceptualization and empirical testing. In my own research, I used several specific theories to understand better how ordinary people search for information; e.g., gratification theory (Chatman, 1991) and alienation theory (Chatman, 1990). I am particularly curious about ways in which poor people view information and use it, and whether or not they care to share it. In my examination of this process, I uncovered the four concepts described earlier.

The consortium of these four concepts are an outgrowth of both deductive theory application and inductive theorizing that arose from my field experiences. The result of this process is the creation of six propositional statements.

Propositional statements provide an explanation about aspects of social reality. These explanations designate relationships between the statements, that when taken as a whole, provide the parameters for a theory. In this instance, their purpose is to act as a guide when examining issues of information-seeking behaviors and information poverty.

An impoverished information world is one in which a person is unwilling or unable to solve a critical worry or concern. Because needs are not being met, this information world is viewed by an insider as dysfunctional. A contributing factor to information poverty is insider's membership. Stated more clearly, this means that our place within a social landscape is shaped by the norms of other insiders (Summer, 1907). The role of such norms is to aid and define things that are legitimate to seek and appropriate to share.

Sometimes those norms include standards by which

to define things that are legitimate to seek and appropriate to share. For example, Whyte (1981) discusses the social worlds of two types of young men; The "college boys" and the "corner boys." Although they inhabited the same social society, their norms regarding approaches to life were remarkably different. For instance, college boys had a future orientation which would lead to a college life style, whereas corner boys valued things that would enhance a free-spending life. Because of these two separate worldviews, the young men neither shared information nor sought information from each other.

What this example illustrates is that our membership within a particular social group contributes to information poverty. How? Because we can experience a need for information but are hindered from seeking it. Thus, we engage in self-protective behaviors to keep others from sensing our need. These behaviors are meant to hide our true crisis in an effort to appear normal and to exhibit acceptable coping behaviors.

The idea that others have an enormous influence on the way in which we behave in a social setting finds support in Park's description about human communities. In speaking about the role others play, Park (1952, p. 83) explains:

There is not now, if there ever was, any question that the individual's conception of himself, the role which he plays in any society, and the character which he eventually acquires are very largely determined by the associations which he makes and, in general, by the world in which he lives.

Based on the focal concepts fundamental to this discussion, I devised six propositional statements. Keep in mind that they represent a collective rather than an individualistic model of need. As a theoretical framework, their purpose is to describe an impoverished information world.

Theory of Information Poverty

- Proposition 1: People who are defined as information poor perceive themselves to be devoid of any sources that might help them.
- Proposition 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.
- Proposition 3: Information poverty is determined by self-protective behaviors which are used in response to social norms.
- Proposition 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.
- Proposition 5: A decision to risk exposure about our true problems is often not taken due to a perception that negative consequences outweigh benefits.

Proposition 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.

To recapitulate, the role of propositions is to provide explanations or information about an aspect of reality. These explanations designate relationships between the statements that, when taken as a whole, provide the parameters in which to examine that phenomena. The value of propositions to theory construction lies in their ability to be tested, thereby, strengthening or weakening the theory.

Now that the four concepts, *secrecy*, *deception*, *risk-taking*, and *relevance* have been developed into a conceptual framework, the discussion will illustrate how my research has led to the creation of this framework. I should mention that I did not begin my inquiries with these concepts in mind. Rather, the findings reveal that they are components of my studies that have not been resolved.

Research Findings: Empirical Support for the Theory of Information Poverty

As mentioned earlier, the concepts of secrecy, deception, risk-taking, and relevance were first discovered through anomalies. For example, in an inquiry I conducted exploring the world of CETA women (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) (Chatman, 1987), I applied opinion leadership theory. I chose the framework because of the focus of the study, namely, information-seeking and sharing behavior. Based on propositions comprising the theory, it seemed reasonable that opinion leaders (persons from whom others sought information or advice) would be present. The results indicated that a small number of such leaders was found. They were, however, not engaging in information sharing. This finding was particularly puzzling because inherent in opinion leadership is the notion of sharing. Reasons why this process was not occurring fell outside the explanatory nature of the theory.

This anomaly led to the following observation. Not all information is of equal *value* within a social system. Some of it is more valuable than others, and some carries some element of *risk*. Therefore, opinion leaders would not share information of either type. Moreover, I concluded that if these conditions are present in the information exchange process, there will *always* be some degree of information hindrance.

Risk-Taking

The CETA study was primarily guided by propositions comprising models developed in diffusion theory. Within these models, the most relevant to my studies was

the Attribute Model⁵ with its value-laden concept *relative advantage*. In modifying relative advantage to assume the notion of risk-taking, I was able to explain why the CETA respondents would not share information, in particular, job information. The reason was the information was too risky to share, especially when the CETA respondents themselves needed information that might result in permanent employment. I wrote an article titled *Opinion Leadership, Poverty, and Information Sharing*⁶ as the conclusion of that inquiry.

In an earlier section I indicated the most important finding was the discovery that the type of information being sought influences the extent of information sharing. That is, if the information is viewed as fundamental to one's private stock, signs of weighing consequences regarding its sharing become obvious. An example is letting co-workers know you found a job. Thus, in situations in which the *value* of the information is influenced by its currency, my results revealed that most respondents saw no advantage in risking job opportunities by sharing it. Moreover, because the women viewed themselves as essentially outsiders in the agencies in which they were temporarily employed, they did not perceive permanent workers as being supportive. Subsequently, they felt the only persons who wanted to help were they themselves.

Since I suspected the lack of sharing information in the CETA study was due to competition for permanent jobs, I turned to a study that focused on janitors. It was my assumption that, in this more stable environment (many had been at a southern university for several years), I would have a clearer picture of risk-taking and information-sharing. What I found, however, was that there was an enormous need for information but that the kind of information that could assist the people was missing. Furthermore, they perceived themselves as outsiders even within their own social milieu.

My search for answers to explain this unexpected outcome led to alienation theory with its concepts of powerlessness, "normlessness," and isolation.⁷ For example, the data revealed that janitors did not risk sharing information, even about common problems, because they perceived themselves to be isolated from each other. They believed if their supervisors, neighbors, or even friends knew of the problems they were having, that information would be used against them. They did not trust anyone and kept their concerns private.

⁵ For my use of this conceptual framework see, "Diffusion Theory: A Review and Test of a Conceptual Model in Information Diffusion" (Chatman, 1986).

⁶ This article appeared in *RQ*, pp. 341-353 (Chatman, 1987).

⁷ Powerlessness is the sense that one is unable to control or influence life-events; "normlessness" is a sense that normative behavior is lacking in one's social milieu; isolation is that one's personal life is not influenced by the value systems held by outsiders. For further insights regarding these and other concepts associated with alienation, see Seeman's, "On the Meaning of Alienation" (1959).

The careful weighing of consequences associated with information-sharing was so overt in this inquiry that I became thoroughly convinced that it was because the janitors were *outsiders* within a supposedly *insiders* worldview. It simply did not make sense to them to share worries if no one cared.

To find evidence to support my assumption, a re-examination of the notion "that no one cares" is fruitful here. Overall, it would seem that the janitors chose not to make use of interpersonal sources of information because fellow workers "have *no interest* in what you have to say." They believed that personal misfortunes would not receive a sympathetic response. Moreover, job-related accidents only decreased their chances for promotion and advancement. Part of the problem was that it was too risky for them to share the information. Although supervisors were at times consulted, the janitors were selective in the type of things they chose to share with them. In most cases, this centered around things of a general nature such as the need for more help when doing special assignments or the need for more cleaning supplies. Certainly, they shared nothing of a sort that would put them in an unfavorable light.

Matters of greatest importance to the janitors, such as ways to cope with personal or financial concerns, were kept secret. Their perception was that disclosing this information to someone would put them in a lower social position than fellow-workers. In addition, they did not believe their confidences would be respected. As one respondent commented, "I just keep to myself and try to do my work to the best of my ability 'cause don't nobody keep no confidence." According to the theory, what should have occurred, was that their life-world would have led to an "insiders" mentality and would have promoted, at least among themselves, some form of information-sharing. This lack of an insider's sense is another anomaly that is still puzzling. What emerges from the janitor study is a penetrating view that information is not discussed freely with others. Because members of their world are not seen as trustworthy or interested, it is not surprising that they chose not to risk exposing themselves. This theme will also emerge in the study of older women.

What clues regarding risk-taking were provided by the aging study? The results from that inquiry revealed several instances in which the residents at Garden Towers perceived that sharing information was too risky. The retirement community was based on the assumption that residents were ambulatory and in relatively good health; those who required nursing facilities had to leave. Since the respondents feared being institutionalized, they chose to appear healthier than they were. They did not tell anyone about declining health concerns, their uncertainty about their future, inability to deal successfully with the aging process, or their sense of isolation and loneliness. They even kept to themselves dire circumstances, not even telling their children. A reason for

this could be seen in the notion of dependency. In other words, the respondents felt that to tell their children how bad off they were might result in their children shying away from them, thereby decreasing or even eliminating emotional or financial support.

The respondents also knew that residents who seemed to be abandoned by some residents were also ignored by other residents. Why? Because residents did not want to take on the responsibilities for caring for each other. So, even though the women might have gained from sharing their needs, after weighing the potential consequences, they chose not to risk sharing them because, in some way, they would become responsible for each other.

Secrecy

Secrecy is to guard oneself against unwanted exposure. It is a deliberate attempt not to inform others about one's true state of affairs. In short, the object of secrecy is to protect as closely as possible the true picture of one's personal reality. Even if one did share "the secret," the point of secrecy is to reveal as little as possible. The hope is that the information would have absolute relevance, thereby, shutting down the necessity for further disclosure. For instance, in everyday conversation, people often ask how you are. Our usual response is "pretty good" or "fine," which in essence, ends the conversation.

I did not find (as some researchers indicated) that interpersonal communication channels were most preferred by poor people. In my studies the data revealed that information of the most critical kind was not being asked for or shared. This finding produced my first critical anomaly because it challenged a central argument in studies of everyday need and usages, namely, that people will share critical information with family, neighbors, and friends. Rather, my studies consistently showed that it is not just coincidence that information of the most needed type was not being shared. To understand the reasons why I had to return to my data. The end result was the creation of the propositions identified earlier.

In the CETA study, it became clear that an influence on one's decision to remain secretive about a concern was fear. This fear is seen in the following illustration, which focuses on a respondent's observation that some members of her social milieu were undesirable as CETA workers. She believed that their inappropriate mannerisms and behaviors not only reflected badly on them, but had negative consequences for herself as well. Her decision not to voice her concerns was due to her perception that no one, including CETA officials, took the program seriously. Here is her remarkable narrative:

There are some things here I would want to talk over with the officials, but I'm afraid. There should be some standards for people enrolled in CETA. I don't want street people to bring street attitudes into the program.

Since there are no standards, anything is coming in and getting in. There is a lot of pressure around here and nobody is willing to lend a helping hand. Even if I told them my worries, there's no one available for help.

In her assessment of the situation, both "the good" and "the bad" were being treated alike by the administration. Everyone was given the same lack of assistance, and it is not surprising that the respondent was secretive. The degree of wanting to succeed, the identification of oneself as trying to be better than "them" (street people), was perceived as an unrewarded trait.

The decision to keep things secretive is reasonable when faced with a set of circumstances in which one views things from an outsider's perspective. From this stance, one encounters the world of others with utmost suspicion. The description that follows will support these observations. In this case, the respondent was a Latino woman who chose an *insider's* life as a means of self-protection:

Even though I live here, all my customs are the same. I cook Mexican dishes, never American. We still do everything as if we are still in Mexico. My two boys both speak Spanish. My friends been here five years, working for a car dealer. One day, they are gone. I said the State got to them. I think the Americans told on them. So I don't have no American or other culture friends. I keep on my own. My friends, cousins, and family are all from the same town. Only time I communicate with Americans is here on the job.

In the janitorial study, the findings revealed that respondents retreated from their social world. A principal contributor was their sense that sharing information, even of the most general kind, might be potentially dangerous. They described their information world as one in which there was a great reliance on self and in which the need for information was suppressed.

Although I did not initially conclude that their world of work was a competitive one, it did not take long to realize that, indeed, it was. Things that I might have thought relatively easy to share were held tightly. In fact, the janitors made a considerable effort to keep others from having any advantage over them. In the example that follows, the respondent is secretive about her relationship with her supervisor. Mingled with wanting to fit in with other janitors regarding their negative relationships with supervisors was her desire to avoid their patronizing attitude. She begins:

Some of my co-workers tease me about following behind Miss T. Hey, they got to stick their head in those toilets, same as me. They can't do nothing for me. So, if Miss T. wants me to go to Timbuktu, I'm going. You can't even get off probation unless she tells you to. Plus, she'll make a sneaky inspection in a minute. Going in the bathrooms to make sure they're clean, putting her hand on the rail-

ing, checking for dust. I feel like she's my boss, the one I got to please, not them.

Shortly after my conversation with her, this respondent called her supervisor. One day at the door of my office was Miss T., who wanted to know why I was "spying on her workers." So, even though I thought I was presenting a neutral, legitimate role to this janitor, her dependency upon Miss T. led to her having second-thoughts about talking with me.

One of the things that I have learned in my work with poor people is their distrust, and often distaste, of others, supposedly insiders, who reside in their social world. Regarding disdain for other insiders, listen to the incredible bitterness expressed by a female janitor regarding other blacks. In her description a "nigger" is a low-level black. Her secret is her resentment of the need to act out a persona in which the spirit of good will and cooperation dominate her true feelings in order to keep her job:

We always knew whites is dirty. That all they wanted was a working nigger. Then they put blacks over us. They ain't got no more learning than me. They stuck those people over me. When the niggers came in, that be the downfall for us. The white man don't know what's going on. That's where he's made his mistake.

The results from the aging study provided several instances in which the residents perceived the need to be secretive. For example, a phenomenon associated with living at Garden Towers was that the women concealed physical and mental failings. A hindrance to sharing this type of information was mistrust of others to keep the information confidential. Also, revelation would surely lead to expulsion. Not surprisingly, fear of ending one's life in a nursing facility, if others suspected one's true condition, was an effective deterrent to personal exposure. I suspect another reason the residents were not eager to solicit assistance was a desire "not to be a bother." Residents who were constantly asking for assistance were often avoided by others. Knowing that, women who could appear more independent chose to do so.

What these observations revealed is that *secrecy* is necessary because to trust or confide in anyone would adversely reveal the extent of one's need. Moreover, disclosure would surely lead to dire consequences. Finally, sharing the information would not necessarily mean that the audience would sympathize.

Deception

In addition to secrecy, deception was found to be an important factor in information poverty. Deception conveys a slightly different meaning from secrecy. Secrecy is an active process of shutting down or closing off information. Deception is a deliberate attempt to act out a

false social reality. In deception, one never had the slightest intention of telling a true story. Relieved of the truth, one engages in activities in which personal reality is consciously and forcefully distorted. The problem with deception is that because one shares information that is meaningless, information received is the most irrelevant kind.

Why would someone deliberately deceive? One reason, not unexpectedly, is to appear more well-off than one really is. The need to appear to be coping successfully, or at the very least to be coping as well as everyone else seems to be derived by social norms. That is, no one wants to be viewed less capable than one's neighbors or friends at solving problems.

As an example, consider a janitor I visited during her lunch hour. We sat a seat apart in an auditorium. As she began to eat her lunch, I noticed that her sandwich consisted of two pieces of white bread with nothing in between. Since lunch time is one of the few times janitors were seen socializing together, I suspect this was her way of not calling attention to the fact that she couldn't afford a more substantial sandwich. In this case, therefore, the respondent wasn't deliberately shielding information but, rather, was deceptive in her behavior regarding her lunch.

A brief example from my CETA study also adds to the notion that *deception* is used when one perceives oneself as needing to appear normal or making appropriate behavioral judgments. In this case, the respondent indicated that she engages in anti-social behavior to fit in—or to appear to be an “insider.” She remarked:

There is a lot of turmoil around here. This place needs a lot of help. I talked to a friend about wanting to help make it better if I can. There is a lot of blaming, scapegoating, and backbiting. This isn't the way I treat people. But everybody does it so I go along. Nobody really tries to help each other. Plus, the interpersonal relationships leave a lot to be desired. I know that in order to have a good working relationship, you need communication, trust, and cooperation. Since none of these things exist here, I know this is not a safe place to promote my ideas.

The respondent knows that to be successful she needs to assume behavior that stems from the world outside. Because her social environment has not prepared her for some acceptable behaviors, she engages in pretense. Or, as she says with significant insight, the need to “put on airs”:

We need to try to get off welfare. Welfare is like going to mental institutions. We need to see more blacks being visible as nurses and doctors. They should be more placed in jobs they are qualified for. Blacks needs to pep up their language. They should act and talk like the people they're working with and not talk street. When white folks comes down here, they know enough to slap your hand and give you the soul handshake. We should learn

the same. They should learn how to put on “airs” if they have to. We all do it. I put on airs myself when I'm in a situation that call for it. I'm not putting on airs now but I do know how to “git down.”

I should mention that despite this respondent's bravado regarding her ability to cope with the world of work, she later shared several situations in which she needed but did not ask for advice. I was also told by co-workers that they resented her superficiality. However, I cannot fail to commiserate with her situation. In her single-mindedness to fit in, I suspect that her status of outsider prevented her from truly understanding the social and work norms of her place of employment. Thus, in her desire to make an effort to belong, her actions only emphasized the differences between her world and the world of co-workers.

Finally, the aging study with its seemingly homogeneous insulated environment revealed an argument for deception's influence on information-seeking. Respondents were not engaging in information-seeking or sharing behaviors because they wanted to give an appearance of normalcy. That is, they did not want to be viewed as less capable than their neighbors of coping with life-stresses. In some instances, their deception of well-being meant their ability to maintain some degree of independent living. The end result was that many residents were desperately in need of information but *pretended* they were successfully coping without it.

Situational Relevance

The concept of situational-relevance⁸ was also instrumental in explaining information need and use. Although there is much debate about the definition of relevance, one aspect of the term that is fairly consistent is *utility*.

This idea of relevance and poverty, although not explicitly addressed, does fit within a general discussion. For instance, situational relevance theorists⁹ are busily debating issues that examine things such as usefulness (Cuadra & Katter, 1967), applicability to individual concerns or interests (Wilson, 1973), and growth of new knowledge (Swanson, 1977). Cooper (1973) does not directly address usefulness, but the idea is incorporated in his term, “utility.” For instance, in his exclamation, the concept of utility is appealing because it encompasses usefulness and because it is “a cover term for anything about a document that the user values (p. 92).” This

⁸ For background material that led to my use of this concept, see Patrick Wilson's thoughtful essay, “Situational Relevance,” *Information Storage and Retrieval* (August 1973), 9, 457–471.

⁹ For a cogent overview of the situation aspect of relevance, see Schamber, L., Eisenberg, M. B., & Nilan, M. S. (1990) “A Re-Examination of Relevance: Toward a Dynamic, Situational Definition,” *Information Processing and Management* 26, 755–776.

view, that relevance addresses some expressed need of a person, is supported by a number of researchers, such as Froehlich (1994), who for the most part examined the concept within retrieval discussions but whose observations are generalized to everyday use.¹⁰

Although there is no absolute agreement regarding a definition for relevance, the concept is promising. Its appeal lies in its ability to shape a collective perception about ways in which new knowledge is brought into a social system.

Ultimately, a discussion of situational relevance pertains to the notion of sense-making. Borrowing from Dervin's model (1977), the idea is that things that make sense are relevant. More importantly, sources of information must make sense to an individual who is engaged in some problematic situation.

An application of relevance in an everyday context therefore means that which will be of interest is that which is useful in response to some concern or problem. Moreover, understanding the concept of relevance provides insight as to why potentially helpful sources might be ignored: because people who are experiencing a precarious existence do not see a generalized value of many sources provided by outsiders intended to respond to their situation. Even if a source is perceived as potentially useful, it will not do much good to the individual if that source is not legitimized by contextual others.¹¹

In my application of relevance in an everyday context, there is the assumption that what will be of interest to ordinary people is that which responds to some concern or problem.¹² Understanding relevance in this context sheds light on why some potentially helpful sources of information were being ignored. Essentially, the respondents did not see the value to their situations in searching for these sources. Another reason was because a source, even when perceived as useful, often required too much effort or might lead to personal compromise.

The first example comes from the CETA research. As the following narrative will reveal, the respondent wanted some information to improve her interpersonal skills, particularly when relating to other workers. She

did not pursue it, however, because she perceived the kind of information she needed was not available to her and she felt she would not receive a sympathetic response if she revealed to others her need for the information:

A few months back I was going through some personal changes, some attitude changes, and it affected my job performance. I felt that collectively, the white women on my staff didn't understand [my situation]. They didn't understand that it wasn't because I'm black that I was not responding to them.

As indicated in her observations, searching for ways in which to relate better to co-workers seemed a fruitless exercise. Apparently, the messages she was receiving were outside her control. That is, they were not based on mutual benefits or degrees of commonality that working together might permit, but on racial barriers. In her case, what would constitute relevant information is that which would break down the distrust and resistance she was experiencing.

Findings from the janitors also indicated that sources were not sought primarily because they held little or no value to their lived experience. As I mentioned earlier, this finding resulted in the applicability of gratification and alienation theories to find rationale for their behavior. How was relevance shown in the study of janitors? Examples were robberies, rapes, murders, firing, or job suspensions. A conclusion from the data suggests that these items were newsworthy to the janitors because they alerted them to places in which to be wary, informed them who was being victimized, and let them know who was engaged in criminal activity. The news also gave them a sense of co-workers to avoid on the job because of deviant or inappropriate work habits.

Another source of news that fits the relevance model was that which helped define things of interest to the janitors. For instance, tidbits regarding raises, fringe benefits and retirements and news about job leads or vacancies were of high interest. So was news about social, religious (primarily gospel groups), and entertainment events and weather reports (mainly about severe climatic conditions) and obituaries. As might be expected, what made this information relevant was its first-level nature. It is this information that has a direct and immediate impact on the social world of the janitors.

In the aging study, I introduced the notion that relevant information which they could use for their situation was not available. I also reported that, in some instances, it might not have been due to sources being unavailable, but rather that the residents perceived a search for information of the most relevant kind would be too costly. Thus, they engaged in secrecy (in which they chose not to tell others who might be in a position to help them) and self-protective behaviors (to give an appearance of normalcy). What resulted, therefore, was a social network devoid of the most critical kind of information.

¹⁰ For a brief overview of seminal theorists, see Saracevic's (1975) and Cooper's (1973) pragmatic use of utility to provide relevant information; Paisley's (1968) argument for accessibility and ease of use; Foskett's (1972) view that for things to be relevant they must be linked to what is considered public knowledge or what others in an environment define as relevant. There are other equally qualified and important researchers who have made significant contributions to the area of relevance. A choice to include a sample of the work was made for those items that appear most salient to the particular topic under current discussion.

¹¹ Of course, a common sense way in which to accept a non-legitimate source is to identify with a different group. However, moving from one social world to another is not an easy task.

¹² These concerns need not be of dire consequences but might include a desire to satisfy an intellectual curiosity. However, in the studies I have conducted, the necessity to manage problematic situations was indeed critical.

Regarding relevance and its influence on self-protective behaviors, I found that the *environment* in which the women lived played a critical role. For instance, having a close relationship with their children was supported by a filial norm expected by members of Garden Towers. Even though parents might have wanted to discuss aspects of their lives that were becoming physically, emotionally, or financially dysfunctional, the *most relevant* information was not in response to these concerns. From their point of view, rather, it was that which helped them maintain a positive relationship with their children.

In many instances, the women chose to keep private their most serious problems for fear of losing the affection of their children, thereby not only risking avoidance by them, but also having the potential of being viewed as a "poor dear" by other residents because they were abandoned by their offspring.¹³

The result was that the women engaged in a search for information that was relevant but of no great consequence.¹⁴ I defined the degree of relevance as occurring at three levels. The first level pertains to generalized information which occurs within the everyday lived experiences of the residents, the purpose of which is to help the women engage in daily conversations, stay informed about localized happenings, or stimulate some voyeur curiosity such as discussions about media or public figures.

The second level is linked to one's personal need for coping but within an appropriate standard or norm, such as asking for advice about some medical problem. Sharing this information does not involve a great deal of risk. Wishing to know more about some mental worries, such as a fear of losing one's memory, however, was not openly discussed, perhaps because it was an aspect of the aging process of great concern to most residents. Thus, an attitude of avoidance was the norm.

As this situation demonstrates, the notion of relevance becomes more selective the more personal the nature of the information being sought. The third level of information is protected with the highest degree of secrecy. Because of the individualistic nature of this level of information, if found, relevance could make a significant contribution. The women chose to shield this most personal information from both family and friends. One reason was the compromise to their self-esteem and independence they perceived disclosure would cost. It was simply too risky to share. When they chose to describe their physical or mental problems, it was to professional caretakers. Unfortunately, in many cases the women believed the information they received was not relevant or they did not have a great deal of confidence in the advice

¹³ "Poor dear" refers to women perceived to be worse off than other residents.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion regarding my three levels of information and information sharing, see *The Information World of Retired Women*, Chapter 8.

they were being given. Another factor was the perception that caretakers were dispassionate about them and the problematic conditions they were experiencing.

Poverty Life-World

Although there is a body of support for the situational approach to information need and use, I prefer to address this concept in light of a life-world. A smaller picture of the big life-world is one defined by local customs and norms. For purposes of this study, this is a poverty life-world. I deliberately emphasized a poverty *life-world* rather than a situational approach for several reasons. For one, although problems might begin on an individualistic level,¹⁵ for one's personal search strategies to have practical implications, they must be viewed within a frame of social norms. That is, making sense from a problematic situation is certainly worthwhile. To be truly interesting, this sense-making process should be viewed within our insiders/outside context. The value of this approach is to lend legitimacy by insiders that the search for information is an appropriate one. Otherwise, one might indeed search for information but this information might be in response to an illusionary need¹⁶—or a need not recognized by others as relevant or normal. So, even though each person will approach things from a slightly different set of lenses, what holds a social reality together, and ultimately, establishes proper bounds for information-seeking is the recognition by others that those behaviors are customary ones to pursue. Simply stated, then, to convince others that one's problems are not delusory, that they do speak to common experience in my life-world, others who share this world must validate both the problems and authenticate the properness of the search.

Social constructionists acknowledge the interplay between one's personal reality and "the reality of everyday life . . . shared by others" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 28). The idea that new information or new knowledge enters a social system through a shared common sense reality is apparent in Schultz's (1962, p. 149) observation regarding the notion of common-sense thinking and social approval:

Their structure determines among other things the social distribution of knowledge and its relativity and relevance to the concrete social environment of a concrete group in a concrete historical situation.

¹⁵ See for example, the germinal work Dervin has done regarding sense-making useful theory for librarianship: Communication, not information (1977), "The everyday information needs of the average citizen" (1976), "Useful theory for Librarianship: Communication, not Information" (1977), Dervin and Greenberg "The communication environment of the urban poor" (1972).

¹⁶ Regarding the need to recreate a worldview that is real to the individual but unable to be penetrated, even by insiders, see Goffman's *Asylums* (1961).

At this point, my discussion suggests that risk-taking does not occur in a communication void. And, interestingly, a person's idiosyncratic expression of need is not a singular, isolated expression. Rather, the decision to take a risk is reinforced by a social support system that exists in which risk-taking is rewarded. Thus said, the act of sharing one's true and honest concern happens because an individual's problems reflect the everyday ambiguity of life as experienced by others who reside within one's social world.

This is an intriguing notion, that the willingness to shield or take risks is influenced by the idea of legitimizing. That is, that "contextual others" shape and define what problems are appropriate to pursue and acceptable for public disclosure. What this observation implies is that contextual others provide a legitimate channel through some collective *social norm* and that an individual search for information is appropriate within this particular context.

The linkage of information-seeking with social norms is deliberate. In my opinion, it suggests a fundamental process that might explain why some sources are sought and others ignored. Essentially then, what are characteristics of social norms that are relevant to this discussion? According to Sherif (1936, p. 3), social norms are "customs, traditions, standards, rules, values, fashions, and all other criteria of conduct which are standardized as a consequence of the contact of individuals."

Social norms affect the exchange of information because they set parameters around the communication process. They act, in other words, as reference points in which information sharing might be expected to occur. For example, Schultz and Luckmann's (1973, p. 4) observations support the interplay between social norms and a person's relationship (including information sharing) with others. The authors state that, "My life-world is not my private world, but, rather, is intersubjective; the fundamental structure of its reality is that it is shared by us."

World of Outsiders

Why would I characterize members of my research as outsiders? From the studies I described throughout this inquiry, a finding that is consistent pertains to marginality. For example, the issue of *marginality* (Hughes, 1949) can be linked to the environment of CETA women. In this instance, they were temporary workers who came into an employment situation in which social norms regarding work behaviors and attitudes were deeply established. Because many permanent employees viewed them as assuming jobs based on criteria other than qualifications, they chose not to associate with them socially or to share work-related information that could increase their chances for permanency. This finding supports Cooley's (1956, p. 290) view of the poor as experiencing an impoverished life-world. He remarks:

the lack of adequate food, clothing and housing commonly implies other lacks, among which are poor early training and education, the absence of contact with elevating and inspiring personalities, a narrow outlook upon the world, and, in short, a general lack of social opportunity

The absolute closure to avenues that might lead to acceptability was problematic for another reason. It meant that interpersonal communication channels were perceived as unhelpful and the social exchanges among the CETA women and other workers were ones astonishingly devoid of support or mutual caring.

The work I conducted with janitors also provides convincing evidence of an outsider's worldview. The janitors emphasized their identification in *stratified terms*, e.g., as invisible people within the university and as helpless in voicing their frustrations. An indication that they viewed themselves in this light was their social dealing with other workers and their minimal association with members of the academic community. The results from my janitorial research illustrate a barren information climate. With few exceptions, the overwhelming evidence is that they had a minimal association with either coworkers or other members of the university. Significantly, the severity of their information world can be described as one in which there is a stratification of information acquisition and use. Persons most enriched by information sources are those most removed from the everyday life-worlds of janitors. What I concluded from the studies is that the janitors were the most socially isolated from both formal and interpersonal sources of information. And, because of their position within the academic environment, there is precariously little margin for information exchanges. The realization provided by my work with janitors was so compelling that it led to the formulations of alienation theory to explain the destitution of that information world.

Finally, my aging study (1992) provided unexpected clues that furthered my understanding of the role that "outsider" can play in information poverty. The respondents for this inquiry were Southern women. They were intensely concerned about maintaining their heritage and traditional values within the retirement community that I called Garden Towers. In this process of learning to live among strangers, they were experiencing a redefinition of their traditional roles of, for example, mother, wife, and neighbor. More than other groups I studied, this population was undergoing emotional, social, and psychological adjustments for which their familiar world had not prepared them.

In addition, they found that social values and norms which had sustained them previously were not sufficient to enhance their living among strangers. It wasn't that others did not adhere to similar values, but rather that private views were subsumed by open communal living which determined appropriate behavior. The outcome

of leaving one's home, and going to live with other men¹⁷ and women fed a perception that, to survive socially, one needs to keep problems to oneself, appear as normal as possible, and be extremely selective in the type of person one might choose to cultivate as a neighbor or friend. This element of caution was no doubt due to their fear that severe illness would lead to involuntary expulsion from their apartments.

As I indicated earlier, the repercussions of a worldview in which respondents view themselves as outsiders, especially to people who are not part of their world, is not surprising. Based on previous research, one can make a *prima facie* case that people who live in an arduous social landscape view outsiders with skeptical and self-protective eyes.

What became apparent was that my respondents' view of "insiders" (people like themselves who shared a common urgency regarding similar problems) was also that of "outsider." This particular finding is an anomaly. I suppose it is because theorists debating an insiders/outsiders worldview assume that it refers to "us" against "them" rather than an "I" and everyone else is "them."

Conclusion

From these studies, several observations might be made regarding the information world of specialized populations generally. For one, their world is one in which the information needs and its sources are *very localized*. For another, it is one in which outsiders are usually not sought for information and advice. And it is a world in which norms and mores define what is important and what is not.

As a profession, we are only beginning to serve the needs of other populations. The process of understanding begins with research that *looks* at their social environment and that *defines* information from *their* perspective. In summary, this type of research that I and others are doing strives to address the information needs of people who, for whatever reasons, see themselves or are viewed by others as outsiders. We, as members of an information profession, have an obligation to continue to work to identify issues that examine the information needs of the poor, in particular, populations that have traditionally been overlooked by our research efforts, professional practice, and the published literature.

As I said when introducing this article, early in my research career, I was influenced by a debate in which information poverty and economic poverty were interchangeable conditions of need. After systematically examining this relationship, however, I cannot support this argument. What modest advance then does this article

¹⁷ Single men, married couples, and single women lived at Garden Towers. For purposes of my research, I chose to examine single women and their social and information worlds.

contribute to our understanding of information poverty? Perhaps to suggest a theory to explore means whereby we might explain this complex social and cultural phenomenon. A logical beginning would be carefully designed studies based on important research questions. An *important* question would respond to an inquiry currently being conducted, suggest generalizable links with similar or other phenomena, and give fresh insight to matters of professional concern. Working with conceptual frameworks and empirical research has never been an easy task.

What then might our ultimate responsibility as professionals and scholars be? In Park's classical work, *Human Communities* (1952, p. 29), he argues that "it is the [recognition] of the existence of a critical situation which converts what was otherwise mere information into news." In closing, the challenge is to identify that critical situation within the context of a social world that will be newsworthy to its inhabitants.

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