
Chatman’s theory of normative behavior—and her earlier conception of small worlds that have “a specific context that serves a particular population to permit its members to conduct their business in a routine, expected manner” (p. 536)—are drawn upon in many studies using Fisher’s theory of information grounds. This article was the first presentation of the theory of normative behavior, and thus is significant as an influence on information grounds and their use in research. Chatman’s earlier work—especially her 1992 book *The Information World of Retired Women*, her 1996 *JASIST* article “The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders,” and her 1999 *JASIST* article “A Theory of Life in the Round”—was also influential on Fisher as she worked on her dissertation and the resulting theory of information grounds. This article on normative behavior has proven the most influential on continuing information grounds research, however, and is perhaps the best distillation of Chatman’s thinking and theorizing in this area.


Reported on a study of Slam, a social messaging system for cell phones (SMS or a Windows Mobile app). The purpose of the study was to see if Slam served as an information ground and to examine its “social and informational impact[s]” on long-term users (p. 98). The study was the first—published, at least—to apply the theory of information grounds to virtual / online settings. The literature review also provided an excellent summary of the theory of information grounds and much of the research that had been completed on it so far, although other sources are more detailed and thorough for some of the earlier (pre-2006) research. While Slam did act as an information ground and met most of the propositions of the theory, the authors found that two of the propositions needed adjusting to fit online settings. This was because Slam was often used for targeted information sharing and information flow was a primary activity. They proposed that, in online information grounds, social coordination is more important than other forms of information sharing and information flow facilitates social interaction. The latter is almost a reversal of the proposition as originally stated in Fisher, Durrance, and Hinton (2004). The authors also discussed the nature of information sharing using Slam and introduced the notion of information capital, the participants of Slam having both high information capital and high social capital. Further research was suggested into online information grounds (using the updated propositions), their relation with offline information grounds, the lifecycle of information grounds, the role of social types in information flow, and the role of information capital.


Presented a study of immigrants’ use of literacy and coping skills programs run by the Queens Borough Public Library. Information grounds theory was used to inform an outcome-based study examining how immigrants use and benefit from these programs, what role context plays in shaping outcomes, and in what ways these programs qualified as information grounds under the theory. Interviews were used to collect data; it appears many were fairly structured in nature, but others were relatively unstructured. This article introduced information grounds to a broader audience, explaining the theory in the context of information behavior research, particularly that of a social nature. It also appears to be the first explication of the key propositions of the theory of information grounds. In addition, it could be considered the first study to violate at least one of those propositions: the QBPL programs arguably have a primary purpose of sharing information, albeit in a softer sense than an actual public library branch.


Presented findings from survey interviews of 729 college students, guided by questions as to what information grounds students visited, what types of information they obtained there, and why they provided for good information flow. The major contribution of the study was development of a typology of categorical factors or attributes of information grounds, which was also partly based on previous information ground studies. These factors were broken into three categories: people, place, and information-based. Each factor was discussed briefly in the context of the study and previous research, albeit with some focused on more in-depth than others. A few factors were presented as possible directions for future research: roles and social types, motivation, and location and permanence required further study per the authors. Other factors from the typology also serve well as research directions, even if not suggested for further research in the article, and the survey and typology were used to guide future studies. In this study, information-related factors were most important in determining whether an information ground was “best” for the students and for making information easier to share, while people and place were close to tied for second in both cases. The researchers concluded by suggesting further research on the variety of information grounds, their life cycle, social exchange and
construction of information, and affective factors, as well as a debate over nomenclature (space, place, setting, context, etc.)


A study of the information habits (Harris and Dewdney) and information grounds (Fisher) of new and recent immigrants from Mexico working as migrant farm workers in the Pacific Northwest’s Yakima Valley area. The researchers were guided by Harris and Dewdney’s principles of information behavior—particularly the sixth (interpersonal sources are usually favored over institutions or organizations) and fourth (one’s own experience is reviewed first, followed by people like oneself)—as well as by Fisher’s information grounds. The authors asked three research questions: “what role does interpersonal information-seeking play in the lives of migrant Hispanic farm workers and their families? … what are [their] information grounds…? [and in] what types of situations do [they] share information [and] using what media?” (“Theoretical framework” section, para. 3)

The research setting were two Community Technology Centers (CTCs); observations of farm workers, interviews with farm workers and CTC staff, and CTC reports were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data (with a clear emphasis on the latter). The study found significant barriers to the migrants’ information seeking in everyday life, many drawing from social types. While findings on information grounds were limited, the article is significant for its findings on social types and its incorporation of information grounds and habits into one study, the earliest study to explicitly include information grounds alongside other theories and concepts (other than the use of weak ties in Fisher’s original dissertation; see Pettigrew, 1999). The authors suggested also including a variation on Bates’ berrypicking framework in future studies of the role of social types in immigrants’ information behavior and use of information grounds, with the goal of “facilitating everyday information flow” (“Future research” section, para. 6).


Presented preliminary results of a survey / structured telephone interview of 612 residents from the east side of King County, Washington, via a partnership with the United Way. Included were eight questions on information habits (drawing from Harris and Dewdney) and information grounds (drawing from Fisher); the former were primarily quantitative in nature, the latter primarily qualitative (see figure 2 in the article). The study is significant because it is the first study to test information grounds with a large population, and the first known to use a survey / structured interview methodology to ask about information grounds. It also includes the integration of both information habits and information grounds...
concepts and theories, building on Fisher, Marcoux, et al. (2004). Results indicated the most popular information grounds by gender (no significant differences) and income (places of worship more common for lower income respondents, workplaces more common for higher income respondents). A few respondents mentioned online information grounds, but the authors did not explore this further (yet, at least). Respondents found information grounds to be most useful due to the people they brought together, the “diversity in the social situation” (Information grounds section, para. 4), and “the quality of the experience” (para. 5). The authors concluded by suggesting the development of an information grounds typology in future research (this was done in Fisher, Landry, & Naumer, 2007).


A useful overview of Fisher’s information grounds research up through 2006. Many of the influences on the theory are identified in the beginning, although unfortunately it is not made clear which are original influences and which have been identified and incorporated later. Discussed the foot clinic (Pettigrew, 1999), QBPL (Fisher, Durrance, & Hinton, 2004), United Way (Fisher, Marcoux, et al., 2004), public settings (not directly cited), and college student (to come in Fisher, Landry, & Naumer, 2007) studies in some detail; for the latter this chapter discussed more of the results, but provided less analysis and the typology was still in development. In the concluding discussion, the authors argue for research into the relation between information worlds and cognate areas—including Oldenburg’s third places, Chatman’s small worlds, the wisdom of crowds / the “tipping point” (Surowiecki, Gladwell), and Savolainen’s everyday life information seeking—as well as the life cycles of information grounds and people’s perceptions of and participation in them. This is indicative of how studies of information grounds were beginning to incorporate other theories and concepts, and was clearly a call for more of this. A brief presentation of other studies under way—most at the University of Washington—was also made; unfortunately some of these (mostly those by students) appear to have gone unpublished. As noted above, the main contribution of this is to provide a useful summary of the research conducted up until that point and a view into the authors’ thinking at this stage in the theory’s life.


This chapter provided an overview of research in information seeking behavior. Specifically, pp. 19-27 discussed “principles of information-seeking” which are cited and used in a number of information grounds studies (particularly Fisher, Marcoux, et al., 2004, and Fisher, Naumer, et al., 2005). Dewdney was also Fisher’s chair and Harris part of her committee (per MPACT), so the authors
clearly influenced her work on information grounds in other ways as well. The principles are “tentative generalizations about information-seeking behavior in the context of human-service information” (p. 19); each is presented and discussed in turn. They can be paraphrased as: (a) information needs are situational; (b) many factors enter into a decision whether to seek or not seek information and help; (c) the most easily accessible information tends to be sought (albeit with exceptions caused by complicated personal, social, and cultural factors); (d) interpersonal sources—especially those like the seeker—are favored over systems and other formalized sources; (e) emotional support is expected, and affective needs are important in information seeking; and (f) information seekers are creatures of habit and pattern. The authors also present a short section on “problems with the research” (pp. 28-30), in which can be seen some of the influences on Fisher’s research in general and information grounds in particular.


Presented an integrative, but exploratory study of the everyday-life information behavior of “tweens” (youth between 9 and 13 years old). After presenting a review of existing literature on youth and everyday-life information seeking—one that notably stressed “the myth of the digital native” (pp. 302-303)—the authors presented the theories and frameworks they used: Dervin’s sense-making interview process, Chatman’s normative behavior (and associated concepts), Fisher’s information grounds, and “the principles of everyday information behavior” previously discussed by Harris, Dewdney, and Case. The incorporation and integration of these various theories and concepts is significant, particularly given the number used. The article painted a picture of the types of everyday information tweens feel they need, how they seek this information, the barriers they face to such information behavior, how they manage the information they obtain, the criteria they use to assess and share information, the role played by different social types in tweens’ information behavior, and the role of information grounds in tweens’ everyday lives. The researchers presented a number of principles, based on their findings, intended as “a guiding framework” (p. 331) for youth services. The study showed the importance of social factors in tween information behavior, particularly exploring and describing the complex interaction of tweens, their information worlds (and associated contextual complexities), and the information grounds they visit. Thus, this article provides a significant contribution in attempting to integrate information grounds with numerous other theories of social and individual information behavior, and arguably succeeding in beginning to do so.


This was the original publication that Karen Fisher presented her theory of information grounds in, based on her (1998) dissertation study of community
clinics. Notably, she does not call it a theory (rather a “notion,” concept, or model) and does not present the propositions that were generated later (in the 2004 JASIST article). Fisher (as Pettigrew) presented her study of information behavior as it occurred amongst nurses, the elderly, and others at community-based foot clinics, using ethnography and social network theory (particularly Granovetter’s strength of weak ties). Her particular focus was on the flow of what she termed human services information (HSI) at these clinics, from which she identified four contextual factors. These contextual factors led to an analysis drawing on social constructionism (particularly Tuominen and Savolainen’s work) and to the conception of information grounds, of which the foot clinics were the first example. Other examples were suggested, but not explored further here. The study and article is also significant in showing her influences, both within and outside of LIS. The former included Dervin (sense-making, information as communication, and context), Chatman (her work on small worlds, information poverty, and life in the round, as well as her approach to ethnography), Tuominen and Savolainen (social constructionism), and to a slight extent Kuhlthau (context). The latter included Granovetter; Edwards, Potter, and Wetherell (social constructionism in social psychology); and (to an extent) a number of researchers in health and human services.


Discussed the relationships between Chatman’s small world stream of research—including her theory of normative behavior—and Fisher’s theory of information grounds, focusing on the spatial and social factors of each theory. The author argued that both theories require the intertwining of spatial and social factors, but that in small worlds they produce “a predominantly constraining context” while in information grounds they “produce contexts that invite the sharing of information with copresent people and seek it from them as well” (p. 44). Small worlds, he argued, are restricted by their conception based in the difference between insiders and outsiders, and “have lost much of [their] relevance because … [it treats] contexts of everyday action in terms of little boxes … characteristic of the traditional industrial society,” rather than in terms of present-day society (p. 44). Information grounds are better suited to the study of broader, more “diffuse … social networks” (p. 44), including online and networked settings. The concept of small worlds is still useful, according to the author, but is limited to the study of relatively closed and localized communities. The article is significant because it compares one of Fisher’s influences, and how it has evolved since, with her theory of information grounds and how it has evolved. Unfortunately, Burnett and Jaeger’s expansion of Chatman’s theory of normative behavior into their theory of information worlds—at least partially intended to move beyond the “little boxes” limitation of small worlds—is only briefly mentioned.

Tuominen, K., & Savolainen, R. (1997). A social constructionist approach to the study of information use as discursive action. In P. Vakkari, R. Savolainen, & B. Dervin (Eds.),
Discussed social constructionism as an approach to be used within information science to study information behavior and use in a discursive context. The chapter is significant for presenting one of the cited influences on Fisher as she formulated her theory of information grounds. The authors defined social constructionism as an approach that argues that “the primary human reality is persons in conversation” (p. 81, quoting Harré, 1983, p. 58), that talking and writing consist of production, organization, and construction of “our social reality” (p. 82). They believed this is a more appropriate approach to the study of information use than either the “Shannonian” (p. 83) or cognitive viewpoints. They noted such an approach would be consistent with the work of Taylor (1993, p. 92) and Dervin (1991, p. 45) in considering information as “a property of conversation” and as needing to be “reconceptualized in communication terms,” respectively. After a presentation of discourse analysis and its application to studying information use, the authors compared their approach to those of Buckland (p. 90) and Dervin (pp. 91-92). It is in the latter that they stated most clearly a key belief of social constructionism: “social reality is created through conversational networks by using various argumentative resources and culturally developed tools to make some version [of events] factual” (p. 92). The influence of social constructionism, Tuominen and Savolainen’s construction of it, and the work of Dervin are clearly felt in Fisher’s information grounds research, especially early on.


Discussed the information behavior, seeking, and needs of older people and the relationship between these and information literacy for older people. Focused on the “fourth age,” “characterized by illness, fraility, increasing dependence, and the imminence of death” (p. 77). The studies reported on were not “pure” information grounds studies, but the need for information grounds of those in the fourth age was stressed, “since information often needs to come to” them (p. 80). The authors argued that naturally occurring information grounds—such as beauty shops, coffee hours, and socialization with gatekeepers—need to be taken advantage of; in addition artificial social gatherings may be created to stimulate the sharing of information via artificial information grounds. The article is significant for expanding the reach of the concept and theory of information grounds, particularly beyond Fisher and her associates.