Inner-City Gatekeepers: An Exploratory Survey of Their Information Use Environment

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This article describes the information use environment (IUE) of African-American gatekeepers in Harambee, an inner-city neighborhood in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In-depth one-on-one interviews were held with a purposive sample of 20 gatekeepers identified through community-based organizations between April and May 1997. Findings indicated that the gatekeepers were slightly better educated and earned more than the average Harambee resident. The most prevalent information needs experience related to race relations, crime and family, and their sources of unmet needs were lack of awareness of or access to existing information or resources. Interpersonal sources were preferred over all other sources because of concerns about trustworthiness and credibility of information. The implications of these findings for professional information services are discussed.

Introduction

This article reports a case study of the information use environment (IUE) of African-American gatekeepers in Harambee, an inner-city neighborhood in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Taylor defined IUEs as the set of elements which affect the availability, access to, and use of information by a group. These elements also determine the criteria by which information is deemed relevant and useful (1986). Although IUEs have origins in the information use and user studies of the 1960s and 1970s, the construct is more cognitive and user centered than its antecedents (Morris, 1994). Consequently, IUE surveys seek to chart all the personal and contextual factors likely to influence information needs, seeking and use behaviors (Dervin and Nilan, 1986; Taylor, 1991). In so doing, IUE surveys avert the criticism of investigating “something (researchers) call information, rather than something users call information” (Dervin, 1983a, p. 158).

Although an IUE typology was developed for different ethnic groups, it has not been applied to African-American inner city communities (Metoyer-Duran, 1993a). As a result, there is inadequate knowledge about what they call information and a mismatch between their needs and available professional information services (Chatman, 1991). This mismatch may also be attributed to the preference in these communities for information from within their own subculture (Chatman, 1996; Childers, 1975; Dervin & Lane, 1992). Such preference suggests the use of gatekeepers as intermediaries between the subculture and the information resources of the larger society (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Chatman, 1996; Lindbeck & Snower, 1988; Wilson, 1983).

This article describes the IUE of African-American gatekeepers in Harambee, focusing on their everyday information needs and problem situations, the sources of unresolved needs as well as their preferred information sources. The study does not directly explore their activities in mediating information seeking by other community members (i.e., how they interpret and transmit information to others). Rather, it is assumed that the IUEs of the gatekeepers are influenced by their quest for information on behalf of others. Such quests are therefore considered part of the information needs of the gatekeepers. The study approach combines two types of IUEs: Geographical, and social/intellectual/cultural (Taylor, 1986). The strength of this approach is that it takes cognizance of the conditions imposed by the inner-city setting, the African-American culture, and indigent state of this community. The IUE surveys such as reported here provide the necessary data for the design of user-driven information services.

Background and Conceptual Framework

The Information Environment of Inner-City Communities

Information use and user studies have focused in the past on professionals (e.g., physicians, Blois, 1985), disciplines (e.g., geoscience, Bichteler & Ward, 1989), and institutional settings (e.g., library media programs, Kuhlthau, 1988; R &
D organizations, Allen, 1977). Although a considerable number of studies have examined the everyday information needs of average citizen groups, our understanding of the information environments of the urban poor in inner-city communities is incomplete. Consequently, the design and operation of public-library services for example, are not informed by the IUEs of these communities (Chatman & Pendleton, 1995). This might explain why the profile of the public-library user is unlike the typical inner-city resident (Lange, 1988).

A growing body of user studies suggest that context, i.e., a user’s specific information environment at a point in time, might be a better predictor of needs and uses of information than socioeconomic status (Chatman, 1985, 1991; Savolainen, 1993, 1995). Personal factors such as communication skills, perceptions of and predispositions to particular media, interest, and motivation levels are influential in defining an IUE (Chen & Herron, 1982; Ettema & Kline, 1977; Genova & Greenberg, 1979). By implication, inner-city communities may fail to benefit from information services through lack of awareness, motivation, access to or proficiency in exploiting relevant information sources (Chatman, 1991).

Groups develop social norms pertaining to tactics with which they “make sense” of their situations and ultimately resolve their needs (Dervin, 1980). Among the inner-city poor, such tactics as avoidance of risks, secrecy, and deception effectively limit access to second-level knowledge, i.e., knowledge originating from outside their lived experiences (Chatman, 1996; Chatman & Pendleton, 1995). Since the validity and relevance of second-order knowledge is suspect, the urban poor tend to distrust information originating from outside their value systems and social environments (Chatman, 1991, 1996; Metoyer-Duran, 1991). As a result, these communities (urban poor) tend to rely on interpretations of trusted intermediaries such as gatekeepers for their second-hand knowledge (Booth & Owen, 1985; Borowiec, 1975; Metoyer-Duran, 1993a). This phenomenon has been called the “insider-outsider” factor (Chatman, 1996) in information seeking.

**Gatekeepers in Inner-City Communities**

Gatekeepers are defined as information intermediaries who move between cultures, linking their community members with alternatives or solutions (Kurtz, 1968). They are usually individuals who have a high information potential; a greater awareness of and use more information resources than do other community members, irrespective of employment status, educational level, income or longevity in the community (Dervin, 1976b; Duran, 1977; Holland, 1974). As intermediaries, they mediate between formal and informal networks (Booth and Owen, 1985); public agencies and ethnic citizens (Borowiec, 1975); and their cultural communities and the dominant society (Duran, 1977).

In inner-city communities, gatekeepers serve as links between the “insider/outsider” communities. To play this role, they are often perceived as opinion leaders who listen, are listened to, and by sharing new ideas, moderate or facilitate change within their communities (Chatman, 1987; Childers, 1975; Kidd, 1976; Durrance, 1980). Their role as change agents is premised on influence and trust (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). As community members, they mirror the needs and resources of the community in their information seeking and use patterns. Consequently, it is recommended that information services such as public libraries establish ties with them for effective dissemination of information (Chatman and Pendleton, 1995; Snyder, 1976).

Integrating the gatekeeper and professional informational roles, Dosa and colleagues recommended information counseling services based on networking, advising, and repackaging information to resolve community information needs (1988). Based on her study of ethno-linguistic gatekeepers in the American-Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Latino communities in California, Metoyer-Duran developed a set of profiles ranging from gatekeepers who inhibit the flow of information to those who act purposely to bring about social change. She observed a gap in knowledge of gatekeepers among monolingual communities such as African Americans in inner city settings (1993b). The present study seeks to fill that gap.

**Study Setting**

**The Harambee Neighborhood**

Harambee, (a Swahili term for “pulling together”), has a population of about 25,000, with a density of 11,250 persons per square mile. The ethnic composition is more than 80% African American. Located in Milwaukee’s inner city, the Harambee community reflects the symptoms of urban poverty and neglect. The rate of unemployment is estimated at more than 20%, while the rate for the city is 6%. Similarly, the crime rate recorded for Harambee far exceeds that for the city. More than half the population have not attained high school graduation. Sixty five percent of families in the neighborhood are headed by single female parents and almost 50% of the households survive on an income of less than $10,000 (U.S. Census, 1990).

The neighborhood is, however, strategically located; being only a couple of minutes away from downtown Milwaukee, Lake Michigan, parks, and expressways. Other unique features of Harambee include its pockets of affluent segments, the mix of long-term home owners and a transient tenant population, and the range of old vintage homes, modern structures as well as boarded houses and vacant lots. Within the last three years, a few new businesses (banking and insurance) and other economic activities have come into the neighborhood. This seeming economic renewal may be attributed to the community-development activities of some neighborhood-based organizations. The gatekeepers who participated in the present study were affiliated with some of these organizations.
Community Development Activities

In 1995, the Community Block Grant Administration convened about 20 organizations to coordinate a Harambee neighborhood initiative. Harambee residents participated in the planning process which led to the development of a vision statement and a neighborhood strategic plan. A Steering Committee, 70% of which were residents, was inaugurated in 1995 to oversee completion of the neighborhood strategic plan. Briefly, the documents were designed to address issues related to economic development, employment, crime and drugs, community education, and voter registration. The neighborhood has since received up to $2.9 million grant funding for job creation, business development, and neighborhood empowerment projects (Neighborhood Strategic Plan Summary, n.d.).

The present study was undertaken under the auspices of two organizations who were key players in the neighborhood development activities. They are the Harambee Ombudsman Project, Inc. (HOP) and the Neighborhood and Family Initiative (NFI). The HOP was created in 1974 as an intermediary between residents having unmet needs and existing agencies which are perceived as not adequately meeting those needs. The project seeks to address needs in the areas of employment, business and home ownership, child placement, alcohol and drug rehabilitation, for examples. A neighborhood block network, which includes existing service agencies is developed to help articulate community needs and disseminate knowledge from HOP experiments to other communities. The HOP also engages in advocacy, direct action, and initiation of self-help projects to meet the needs of the Harambee community. Some of its current programs address alcohol and drug treatment, foster-care placement, home-buying counseling, and community organizing.

The NFI is a demonstration program sponsored by the Ford Foundation. Part of a four-city project, the NFI attempts to develop and implement models of integrated and collaborative neighborhood development. It targets the whole family, the physical and economic environment, and the community’s leadership and organizational needs. As a demonstration project, its focus is in developing and testing new strategies to alleviate poverty and revitalize the neighborhood. Its current programs include:

- The Riverworks Industrial Park, a $10 million effort to add or retain 2,000 jobs in the manufacturing sector;
- The Martin Luther King Economic Development Corporation, a $2 million revolving loan fund for business and housing development;
- Harambee Empowerment Action Team (HEAT) community organizing and workshops aimed at developing the leadership and teamwork abilities of area residents;
- Maximizing Opportunities in a Restructuring Economy (MORE), providing training and employment in the health-care sector (Chaskin & Ogletree, 1993; Milwaukee Foundation, 1994).

The gatekeepers surveyed for this study were affiliated with these organizations, either formally as staff or informally as “collaboratives” or task force members of their development projects. Drawn from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, many of them have earned the status of informal gatekeepers, and opinion or community leaders in their own right. They had been involved in the neighborhood strategic-planning process. As a result of their activities and affiliations, they were deemed to play gatekeeping roles either formally as part of their job descriptions, or informally as a result of their influence in the community.

Methodology

Selection of Sample

Twenty African-American residents of Harambee constituted the eventual sample for the study. An initial pool of 27 had been identified for the researcher by the community-based organizations. The pool included community organizers and leaders as well as community liaisons and “collaboratives” of the two organizations. The sampling method was therefore purposive. All but one of the 27 agreed to participate in the study. Data from the first three interviews were used to pilot test the instrument. Two gatekeepers were eliminated for not residing in Harambee. One gatekeeper of Hispanic parentage was also dropped since study focus was on African Americans.

Procedures

Most of the interviews took place at the offices of the two organizations. A few were held in respondents’ offices or homes. The researcher personally interviewed all the participants. A research assistant was present at some of the interviews and took notes which were compared with those of the researcher after each interview session.

Gaining entry to the population and preparations leading to data collection took about seven months. Data collection was conducted in two months, April to May 1997. In-depth one-on-one interviews lasting on average 1.5 hours were conducted with each of the 20 gatekeepers. The interview instrument consisted of both closed and open-ended questions. It was adapted from instruments of comparable studies by Dervin (1976b), Dervin and Clark (1987) and Metoyer-Duran (1993b) to enhance its relevance to this particular population.

In all, each participant responded to about 60 questions categorized under:

- Demographics;
- Types of problem situations (information needs);
- Sources of unresolved problems (unmet information needs);
- Preferred information sources.
The instrument did not explore their activities as gatekeepers per se, except to acknowledge that some of their information needs and seeking behaviors might have been initiated and undertaken respectively, on behalf of other community residents.

A doctoral student who served as research assistant helped to review the interview schedules, brainstormed on the constructs of the study, attended and kept notes on the initial interviews, and offered helpful feedback for adapting the content and process of the interviews.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Who are gatekeepers in the Harambee community?
2. What types of information do gatekeepers in Harambee use to resolve problems for themselves and their community?
3. What are the sources of unresolved problems?
4. Where do gatekeepers in the Harambee community get their information?

The questions sought to ascertain:

i) The demographic profile of the gatekeepers;
ii) The nature of everyday needs or problems encountered by the gatekeepers;
iii) The nature of obstacles encountered in the course of resolving their problems;
iv) Their perception and use of information sources to resolve those needs.

Pilot-Test

Three initial interviews were used to discern any weaknesses in the design of the instrument and interview process. The three represented different clusters in the sample: A community liaison for one of the organizations, a “collaborative,” and a community leader.

Feedback from the three initial interviewees and the research assistant were used to retool both the instrument and process. For example, it was found that some gatekeepers tried to separate their personal needs from those they had addressed on behalf of other community members. The wording of the instrument and explanations of the interviewer were adapted in subsequent interviews to elicit information on both their needs and those of other community members. The time allocation of the interviews also had to be extended to enable respondents time to reflect and respond more leisurely.

Reliability and Validity

Chatman’s model for ensuring reliability and validity was adapted in this study (1992). However, since field observation was not part of the data-collection method, particular care was taken with the interview procedures to ensure reliability: The degree to which interpretations of data from the sessions were consistent with some phenomenon of interest. Each phenomenon was explored in-depth in order to discern regularities or otherwise. The investigator consistently took notes during the interviews and immediately afterwards. All the interview sessions were also audiotaped. Questions were repeated in the instrument to enable tapping into a phenomenon from different perspectives, time frames, and settings; or to check on the consistency of responses. As a check on the personal bias of the investigator, responses to questions derived from previous research in this study were checked with the interpretations of the same phenomenon in the previous studies. One of the completed schedules was validated in person and two by telephone (total = 15%) to determine the accuracy of the interviewer’s notes.

Internal (content and face) validity was enhanced through the pilot test and verifications from the research literature and experienced staff of the community-based organizations who were not participating in the study. The experience of the latter who are engaged in assessing needs, disseminating information, and coordinating services in the community helped to serve as a means of cross-checking on the interpretations of data.

To enhance criterion validity, detailed notes of researcher’s impressions were written up immediately after each interview session. This served to complement the interview schedule and audiotaped for. For example, in exploring the “insider/outsider” phenomenon, the researcher observed in the interview notes that Harambee residents might distrust institutional information sources even as they perceived such institutions as the public library favorably. Their lack of awareness of available library services (e.g., free computer workshops) may therefore be indicative of their perceptions of such institutions as catering to “outsider” needs.

Moreover, at instances when they could secure information directly from relevant agencies via a telephone, the gatekeepers and, by implication, other community members chose to use intermediaries. Sometimes, this route required more effort and time. Results from the interview guide and audiotaped lend support to the notion of a relationship between their avoidance (consciously or unconsciously) of institutional information sources and the perceived trustworthiness of information or services from those sources. Complaints of being given the “runaround” and “us against them” for examples, illustrate their perception that institutional sources catered to and are controlled by “outsiders.”

Data Analysis

Data on the questionnaires and audiotapes were cross-verified. Data on the questionnaires were coded and transformed to machine readable form and analyzed. The present report is based on preliminary analyses using descriptive statistics and content analysis of the data.
TABLE 1. Educational attainment of gatekeepers and community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational attainment</th>
<th>Gatekeepers (%)</th>
<th>Community (%)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No high school diploma</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school (incl. GED)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college (no degree)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree (incl. Master’s and above)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Results

Demographics: Gatekeeper Profiles

Research question 1: Who are gatekeepers in the Harambee community?

The gatekeepers have been residents of Harambee from 5 to 50 years, with a mean duration of 25.4 years. Their age distribution depicted a pattern similar to that of the neighborhood at-large which had the highest percentage within the 35 to 59 age range. Those who were within the 20 to 30 age bracket are staff of the neighborhood-based organizations whose job descriptions cast them as formal gatekeepers in the community.

There were eight males (40%) and twelve (60%) females. Eleven (55%) are single, five (25%) are married, two (10%) are separated or divorced, and two (10%) are widowed.

Table 1 illustrates the contrast between the educational attainments of the gatekeepers and the rest of the community.

As evident from the table, the gatekeepers as a group tended to have more formal education than the average for the community. Among the gatekeepers, males in general, showed a higher level of educational attainment than the females.

Some of the gatekeepers have retired from paid employment but are working or volunteering their services at neighborhood-based organizations. Nine (45%) worked full-time while ten (50%) worked part-time. One is a full-time student (5%). Positions of those in active employment ranged from directors of service organizations (4), to youth counselors (3), community outreach organizers (3), pastors (2), salesmen (1), fast food crew trainer (1), grants coordinator (1), and hospital diet aid (1).

Their current annual incomes range from $4,000 to $50,000. The median personal income of about $23,000, is twice Harambee’s median household income of $11,686. The income distribution of the gatekeepers could have been higher were some of them not retired volunteers.

Summary

In response to the first research question: Who are the gatekeepers in the Harambee community?, the data suggests that they range in age from young adults to senior citizens; consist of both males and females, and work in diverse occupations, occupying a variety of positions. Harambee gatekeepers have attained more than the average level of formal education for their community and occupy formal or informal positions as gatekeepers. This profile is consistent with those of previous studies (Kurtz, 1968; Dervin, 1976b; Duran, 1977; Holland, 1974; Metoyer-Duran, 1993b; and Snyder, 1976).

Education and, consequently, income set the gatekeeper group apart from the profile of the average Harambee resident. Education, therefore, appears to be the most significant demographic variable for their IUE. To mediate between “outsider” information resources and the community, they require knowledge and proficiency in exploiting these resources, as well as the organization and conceptual structure to interpret and add value to information for use by community members (Knott & Wildavsky, 1980). However, such knowledge and skills as familiarity with the workings of service agencies and experience in research and information problem-solving are not imparted directly through formal education. Rather the gatekeepers might have acquired such preparations as part of their regular job experiences.

Information Needs

Research question 2: What types of information do gatekeepers in Harambee use to resolve problems for themselves and their community?

To answer the second research question, it was assumed that the types of information used were indicative of their information needs. Information needs were conceptualized as problems or problem situations requiring resolution (Belkin, 1980; Wersig & Windel, 1985). Problem situations experienced by the gatekeepers directly or indirectly through their clients were assessed using the Information Needs Analysis Scheme developed by Dervin (1976a). Participants read through the 19 categories of the scheme and indicated the needs they experienced directly or indirectly during the previous six months. They were prompted to add to the list under each category if it was not exhaustive. The respondents later explained the natures, sources, and contexts of sample problem situations and attendant needs. The frequencies with which needs in each category were mentioned are shown in Table 2.

The rank order of the categories contrast with those for the communities and gatekeepers studied by Dervin (1976a) and Metoyer-Duran (1993b) respectively. In the former, finance and housing needs (which ranked in the last quarter in the present study) had the highest priority. In Metoyer-Duran’s study, public affairs (ranked lowest in the present study) and education ranked highest. Education was ranked midway in the categories in the present study. This showing may support Chatman’s (1991) and Childer’s (1975) findings relating to the orientation of the urban poor to short-
TABLE 2. Categories of information needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major category</th>
<th>Gatekeeper/Community needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination and race relations</td>
<td>7.5*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime and safety</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family planning and birth control</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care and family relationships</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation and culture</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housekeeping and household maintenance</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration, migration and mobility</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public assistance and social security</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans and military</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood problems</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial matters</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public affairs, political and miscellaneous</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total needs named</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The proportions were calculated by dividing the number of needs named in a given category by the total of needs categorized.

long-term and pragmatic needs. Such an orientation predisposes them to seek coping information, rather than information and activities that would transform their socioeconomic conditions (Nauratil, 1985).

Summary

In response to the second research question, the types of information used by the gatekeepers spanned all the categories in the Information Needs Analysis Scheme which has been standardized for investigating everyday information needs. The types of information sought most related to race relations; crime and family. The role of race and geographical location in the findings of this study in comparison to those of Dervin and Metoyer-Duran can only be speculated. Dervin studied racially mixed urban populations in some north- and mid-western states while Metoyer-Duran studied gatekeepers of different ethnolinguistic groups in California. It could be speculated that the difference between these findings may be attributed to the nature of the groups (the urban poor or community gatekeepers); their racial composition, the times or geographical location of the studies. It might also be that the emphasis on race relations and crime is indicative of Milwaukee’s reputation as one of the most segregated cities in the United States (Coleman, 1997). Future research is needed to ascertain the most potent factors in predicting needs’ priorities within inner-city communities.

Interestingly, although crime and safety concerns were the second most frequently cited needs, content analysis of their explanations revealed that 80% of the participants felt that the crime rates for Harambee were over-exaggerated by the media. The problem, they claimed, was no worse than in other Milwaukee neighborhoods. In contrast, they felt that unemployment is probably higher in Harambee than other neighborhoods. Yet, it was not ranked among the top three most frequently cited needs. One (5%) participant felt the rate could be as high as 50%. It was, however, observed that many people work at jobs which are not computed in the labor statistics, e.g., housework, car washing, lawn mowing, etc. All the gatekeepers attributed the unemployment and poverty rates to the large number of female-headed, single-parent households in the neighborhood.

Sources of Needs and Resolutions

Research question 3: What are the sources of unresolved problems?

To answer the third research question, respondents were asked to react to a matrix of sources or types of resolutions to problem situations (Dervin, 1976a). The list suggests that the information environment may be such that needs arise because information or resources either (1) do not exist; (2) exist but are inaccessible; and (3) are accessible but not usable (i.e., due to lack of enabling skills). Combinations of these factors (information and resources) were not explored directly; except at the instance of participants’ explanations of the nature of their situations. The participants provided examples for each instance (Table 3).

The gatekeepers felt the information or resources they desired existed most (84%) of the time. They perceived their problems as related largely to lack of awareness, access to and proficiency in their exploitation. For example, although most of the respondents desired to learn how to use computers, none of them was aware that the neighborhood public library had advertised a series of free computer workshops beginning a few weeks from the time of the interviews. Since they were supposed to have better access to information than the average community resident, this finding suggests that the gatekeepers’ roles may be specialized to types of information and institutional sources. Besides, this finding is also indicative of the effectiveness of the library’s publicity machinery.

Many respondents alluded to the “insider/outsider” phenomenon in their quest for information/services from institutional sources. One used the terms: “us versus them” to suggest that staff of some agencies practice “selective dissemination of information.” Such staff, they claimed, throw up bureaucratic bottlenecks to deny or delay access to information or services when they identified (by speech on the telephone) the requester as “black and poor.” Many of them complained that they were given endless referrals (the “runaround”). For example, a respondent said she had to call no less than six different agencies, offices or staff to determine if she qualified for assistance from a home rehabilitation program. The belief that they are singled out for such treatment (perceived or real) would reduce the trust-
worthiness of information or services provided by such social agencies. They, therefore, believe that the information or resources they need do exist but are made inaccessible to them by “outsiders” who control the “system.” Such perception may explain why they are unaware of many services that could benefit them.

The categories of sources of needs experienced by the gatekeepers are not mutually exclusive. For example, the problem arising from mice in the home could be due to lack of access to existing information on the desired technology, rather than non-existence of pertinent information. Moreover, the non-use of investment information by a gatekeeper points to the difference between gaining physical access to relevant information and being able to understand and apply it. While the information retrieved was about investment, it was written in technical accounting and tax jargon and suggested options which were beyond the financial resources of the respondent. Another respondent complained of being unable to afford auto insurance because of the high cost of same for his inner-city neighborhood; his personal history with auto insurance notwithstanding. Here too, the problem exceeds physical access to information and services. The utility of such information or services is constrained by the lack of enabling resources (cognitive skills or financial resources) which may be beyond the immediate control of the individual. The discriminatory nature of the latter example makes access to financial resources alone an inadequate solution, if the inquirer feels aggrieved by such a system.

This overlap between information and resource-based problems raises questions regarding the demarcation between information and advocacy services. Dervin observed that some problem statements heard among this population may be framed in complaint or lament terms: “...the individual was crying against an error or injustice—only implying

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of needs</th>
<th>Number of times cited/%</th>
<th>Excerpts of participants' description of cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information does not exist</td>
<td>3/2.9</td>
<td>I need a device that could rid my home of mice by emitting a high frequency sound inaudible to humans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information is not accessible</td>
<td>27/26.7</td>
<td>I want to identify the natural parents of my daughter who I adopted 25 years ago (believes information is available on the Internet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information cannot be used</td>
<td>17/6.8</td>
<td>I need investment information; Most of what I find assumes more specialized knowledge and capital than I command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources do not exist</td>
<td>13/12.8</td>
<td>I want to learn computer skills but cannot find affordable classes (respondent was unaware of free workshops at the public library)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources exist but are inaccessible</td>
<td>30/39.7</td>
<td>Police patrols keep away drug activities from street; But the police patrol the white, not black streets; Also, they take longer to respond to our calls when we spot trouble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources cannot be used</td>
<td>11/10.8</td>
<td>I would love to take my kids to the park to play but it's much too dangerous; All kinds of people &quot;hang out&quot; there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>101/99.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Problem Resolutions

Potential resolutions of the situations using information may be categorized into eight classes of information use (Taylor, 1991). These categories which overlap, are listed below with examples of unresolved problem situations from the excerpts above.

Enlightenment: Inquirer needs more context information in order to be oriented to the nature of the problem and options. This category of information use seeks to better frame the need. In the case regarding mice in the home for instance: does the inquirer want any means of ridding the home of mice or must the means be a particular technological device?

Problem Understanding: Inquirer needs specifics on particular situation. The need related to adoptive information for instance, required better understanding of the sources and structure of relevant information on the part of inquirer.
TABLE 4. Most preferred sources of information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>No. of times mentioned among top three sources</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask a neighbor, friend, or acquaintance</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask the relevant agency</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask other gatekeeper/opinion leader and resourceful persons</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use telephone directory and place a call</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check in the newspapers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask family members</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check at the library</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask an acquaintance working for an agency</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask politician/alderman</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask God (Put in a prayer request), pastor, read the scriptures</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use specialized resource directories</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search Computer Files (the Internet)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor Information on TV</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Register for a relevant course</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment (trial and error)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>60</strong></td>
<td><strong>93</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Instrumental:** Instructions on what and how to address problem, e.g., the problem with absence of police patrols.

**Factual:** Provision of relevant data, i.e., information on the existence, source, price, (etc.) of the device to get rid of mice. The resolution may be information confirming that such a device does not exist. Such a resolution overlaps with the next category.

**Confirmational:** A second opinion to verify information, i.e., the quest for affordable auto insurance might have been motivated in part by a need to confirm that there are no good deals out there for anyone residing in the neighborhood. Sometimes such requests are posed to draw attention to a grievance or anomaly.

**Projective:** Concerning estimates and forecasts and oriented to the future; i.e., had the investment information retrieved been comprehensible, it might have offered estimates of potential dividends on investment over time.

**Motivational:** The need to get started and involved in pursuit of a goal, i.e., the need to learn computers was apparently inspired by awareness of the benefits of computer literacy.

**Personal or political:** Information relating to status and personal fulfillment, i.e., again, the need to learn computers might be motivated in part by the potential for upward job mobility and the status accorded the computer literate in this community.

**Summary**

The data suggested inadequate awareness of and access to information and resources as the major sources of unmet needs experienced by the gatekeepers. Since accessibility predicts use of information (O'Reilly, 1979), these factors considerably limit the range of information and services used. This finding supports previous ones on the “insider-outsider” phenomenon in information seeking among the urban poor (Chatman, 1991; Dervin, 1976b). The overlap in the categories of unmet needs call for classification of access beyond physical to include cognitive levels based on linguistic, symbolic, intellectual, and computer skills, for examples. These findings also lend support to calls for extending traditional roles of information and service agencies in inner-city communities to include advocacy and counseling services (Chatman & Pendleton, 1995; Harris & Dewdney, 1994).

**Preferred Information Sources**

**Research question:** Where do gatekeepers in Harambee get their information?

The gatekeepers were asked to indicate the three information sources they preferred to use most. The sources are ordered in Table 4.

Table 4 demonstrates the significance of interpersonal communication, particularly with persons known to the gatekeepers. These personal sources were mentioned almost as many times (about 48%) as other sources. In most cases, use of relevant agencies and telephone directories (totaling 68%) were bids to contact familiar persons who had been of service in the past. Many respondents said they would cross-check any information secured from impersonal sources or unfamiliar persons with other gatekeepers or trusted community members. While this finding may be true to varying degrees for communities unlike Harambee, this finding lends support to the suspicion with which “faceless” sources of information and services are regarded among this sample. At least 70% of the participants mentioned “context,” “orientation,” and “relevance” as their reasons for seeking out persons they know. These personal information sources were often African Americans who shared their “world-view,” “perspectives,” “understanding,” “assumptions,” and “know-what-I-mean.” These sources were perceived to be trustworthy and their information credible (Wilson, 1983).

**Reasons for Choice of Sources**

Reasons for choice of these sources in order of frequency with which they were cited are: Familiarity and reliability of
sources (56%), awareness of source and accessibility (37%), and appropriateness to need (7%). Most often, they had tested and found these sources credible.

The criteria used to assess retrieved information were:

(i) Relevance, the degree to which the information was “meaningful” to the context of inquirer needs;
(ii) Cross verification of information from diverse sources, including trusted persons;
(iii) Going to the source of the information (i.e., agency);
(iv) Critically thinking through the problem solving process;
(v) Trying out the information to assess its efficacy.

It is noteworthy that when the gatekeepers went to social agencies for information (iii above), 68% of them said they sought out “insiders” in the agency to pose their requests, if it were possible. Implicit in this information-seeking style is the preference for information filtered by members of their subculture. It is assumed that “insiders” interpret and repackage the content of bureaucratic information (i.e., government program guidelines) before passing it on to the gatekeepers. At times, this mediation is not unlike advisory and counseling services. Where information is sought on behalf of other community residents, the information is reinterpreted by the gatekeeper to make sense in the context of the eventual user. These gatekeepers, therefore, seem to use other gatekeepers who are closer to and more conversant with the nature or source of needed information.

Summary

Interpersonal communication is the favored medium for information seeking. This finding supports those of previous studies (Chatman, 1985, 1992; Chen and Herson, 1982; Dervin, 1976a; Harris & Dewdney, 1994). Familiarity and reliability or trustworthiness were high in the criteria for assessing information sources and content. These criteria were used to enhance validity and utility of information, thereby indicating the preference of social networks as a primary, information-seeking strategy. This finding also lends support to those of previous studies, particularly Dervin (1976b), Mertoy-Duran (1993b).

Discussion

The IUE of inner-city gatekeepers described in this study may be categorized into four elements: The individual gatekeeper; his/her perceived information needs; sources of unmet needs; and preferred information sources. The processes of information seeking and problem resolution entail creating useful linkages between these elements. The role of professional information services is therefore to determine which linkages are relevant under what conditions (Dervin, 1976a).

It is noteworthy from this study that traditional information services are not tailored to meet some of the everyday survival needs among this population. The pragmatic and short-term orientation of such problems have been attributed to the need for immediate gratification and a belief in fatalism (Chatman, 1991; Kerr, 1958; Gans, 1962). This orientation places the future (i.e., educational) and less crisis-oriented (i.e., recreational) library services beyond the physical and cognitive reach of the stereotypical inner-city resident (Feldman & March, 1981; Taylor, 1960). Future analysis of another data set from this study will explore the nature of needs better met by library and computer resources in this community.

Perceptions also create barriers to information access and problem resolution. As was evident among the gatekeepers in this study, lack of awareness of appropriate information sources may be traced to perceived irrelevance or distrust of information from sources considered to be in the service of “outsiders.” This further compounds the personal nature of the everyday needs of inner-city populations and the overlap in their information and resource needs. Few information or service agencies could anticipate the range of personal needs experienced in this environment. Consequently, it has been recommended that existing networks of gatekeepers be used to bridge the gap (physical, cognitive, credibility, etc.) between information services and the IUEs of the inner-city community (Snyder, 1976).

The gatekeepers’ preference for familiar information sources may be responsible in part for lack of awareness and use of potential information sources. Although this preference accords with the law of least effort, i.e., people will seek convenient and familiar sources rather than do comparison shopping, the law also suggests avoidance of professional information services due to difficulty in use, i.e., the systems may not be user-centered or friendly.

People who have made futile efforts at retrieving usable information, especially in inner-city environments are likely to assume that either the need cannot be resolved or the service is not designed for their “type.” Often, it is the latter case. As a result, use of information services is largely limited to the highly educated elite for whom such services were modeled purposefully or otherwise (Dervin & Greenberg, 1972).

Apparently, the market niche of the educated elite was reinforced by the use and user studies of the 1960s and 1970s. The challenge of the IUE approach is that professional services customize their programs and services to fit the social norms, personal and contextual environments of their constituents both in physical and cognitive terms. One of the major constraints to be addressed in this new orientation is the categorization of information as defined by disciplinary interests (Taylor, 1986). Everyday life problems, such as those posed by inner-city communities which do not fit neatly into disciplinary classes are poorly served by existing systems (Harris & Dewdney, 1994). Brenda Dervin explained the poor links between the “functional units” of the needs and information systems in these words:
We find, for example, that as citizens begin to use information systems designed “for them,” they collide with those systems. The citizens, on the one hand, are asking for a functional unit that is meaningful to them. The system, on the other hand, is protecting whatever functional unit in which it has a vested interest (1975, pp. 12–13).

Given the structure of professional information systems today, the problems posed them must be defined as they are perceived in the user’s context (Taylor, 1986). Only then can information services make useful links between those problems and their resources. Until then, information services may continue to be received in inner city environments as serving the interests of “outsiders.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

The following observations are noteworthy from the study:

1. The gatekeepers involved in this study are slightly better educated and earn more than the average income rates for the community. The most prevalent information needs experienced related to race relations, crime, and family concerns; and the sources of unmet needs are lack of awareness of or access to existing information or resources. Interpersonal sources were preferred over all other sources because of the concern for relevance and credibility of information.

2. This study suggests that the IUE model provides a useful structure with which to describe the information behaviors of a group. Data provided from application of this model could be used for designing user-centered services. Follow-up studies to the present study could assess the uses and levels of satisfaction experienced by gatekeepers as they seek to solve some of the problems identified in this survey. Also, the types of processing (e.g., interpretation, synthesis, adaptation) they undertake with information before it is found usable by community residents.

3. The IUE of gatekeepers in this study is broadly shaped by the inner-city setting, socioeconomic status as well as the African-American culture. The specific information behaviors of the gatekeepers are however defined by social norms, personal, and contextual factors. The strategic role played by the gatekeepers in their community call for their use by the neighborhood public library and media houses as gateways to access the larger population in marketing and testing new programs and services. Gatekeepers should therefore constitute a significant cluster to be studied in any community analysis or market research.

4. The overlap between information and resource-based problems call for a network of community agencies to facilitate coordination and follow-up in resolution of needs. Advocacy and advisory services might be necessary components of professional information services in inner-city environments. Mass-media houses for instance, have responded to such needs with the use of dedicated interactive columns or time slots to address audience queries on health, the law, auto repairs, etc. Public libraries could partner in such programs. They could also offer information advisory and counseling services using gatekeeper networks. Such networks would enhance awareness and knowledge of appropriate services with respect to community needs.

Acknowledgment

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Appendix I: Interview Guide I

A. Demographics:

Please tell us a little bit about yourself.

1. Age
2. Sex Male ( ) Female ( )
3. Highest grade completed in school
4. Occupation Salary
5. Marital status

B. Harameeb Residence

Please tell us a little about your neighborhood.

6. How long have you lived in Harameeb?
7. Identify three factors which you feel distinguish Harameeb from other neighborhoods in Milwau-

kee.

For examples: ethnic composition, employment rate, crime and safety concerns, health and educational facilities.)

C. Information Needs

8. Please examine the list presented (sources of needs and resolutions list). It contains categories of chal-

lenges/concerns/projects which require information to resolve.

Identify all the categories with which you have experienced concerns or needs either directly or on behalf of other community members during the last six months

9. Describe the nature of needs you experienced in the categories you identified.

D. Sources of Needs and Resolutions

10. If you experienced difficulties resolving a need, do you attribute the difficulties to lack of information or resources?

11. Using the second list, identify and describe the major source of frustration in resolving needs un-

der each of the categories provided.

D. Preferred Information Sources

12. Where did you seek information to resolve the needs, other than depending on your memory or experi-

ence?

13. Name the top three sources you consult for inform-

ation related to each of these needs.

14. Why do you choose to consult these sources?
15. By what criteria do you evaluate their information content?

Appendix II: Interview Guide II

Sources of Needs and Resolutions

Categories of needs (question 8)

1. Neighborhood: Problems with neighbors, children, dogs in neighborhood, city services, traffic and parking, vacant lots, abandoned cars, crime and safety, noise, pets, etc.
2. Consumer: Problems with product quality, product availability, best product information, service quality, service availability, where to get service information, prices, consumer protection, etc.
3. Housing: Problems with loans and mortgages, getting a place to live, landlords, public housing, housing insurance, selling a house, etc.
4. Housekeeping and household maintenance: Problems with regulations on home improvements, utility service, making repairs, do-it-yourself projects, car repair and operation, etc.
5. Employment: Problems with getting or keeping a job, changing jobs, on the job complaints, job training, unions, etc.
6. Education and schooling: Problems with financial aid, adult education services, cost of education, the educational system, scheduling time, parent-teacher relationships, etc.
7. Health: Problems with mental health, health insurance, access to health services, cost, discrimination, etc.
8. Transportation: Problems with inadequate bus service, auto insurance, auto financing, road maintenance, inadequate emergency services, etc.
9. Recreation and culture: Problems with finding recreational activities, cost of recreational opportunities, lack of supervision at children's playgrounds, etc.
10. Finance: Problems with taxes, getting credit or loans, investment information, handling money, life insurance, etc.
11. Social welfare: Problems with unemployment compensation, social security, W2 program, welfare, food stamps, Medicare, etc.
12. Race relations: Problems with discrimination based on race or sex, racial tension and violence, etc.
13. Child and family care: Problems of need for day care, cost and availability of child care, child and adolescent behaviors, need for counseling, etc.
14. Family planning: Problems with birth control, teenage pregnancy, single parenthood, etc.
15. Legal: Problems with legal aspects of marriages, advice with contract documents, divorce, need for legal services, interpretation of law, civil rights, etc.
16. Crime and safety: Problems withfax law enforcement, crime, drugs, community policing and law enforcement, etc.
17. Immigration and mobility: Problems with translation of documents, immigration laws and processes, American citizenship, transient community, being new in area, moving/vacation information, etc.
18. Veterans and military: Problems with veterans benefits, rights, military service, discharges, etc.
19. Public affairs: Problems with locating agencies and people, general government information, political issues and politicians, general factual information, news, current events, travel, religion, etc.

Categories of Resolutions (Question 11)

(i) Resolution is information based: information does not exist information exists but is not accessible (define access) information is accessible but not usable
(ii) Resolution is resource based: resource does not exist resource exists but is inaccessible resource is accessible but not usable

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