

“We didn’t know How Living with *Less* is an

Abstract: Western cultures tend to equate *less* with *poor*; thus, LIS research defines behavioral resources. Yet, minimalist lifestyles, increasingly romanticized and adopted, this phenomenon reveals how living with less actually requires many diverse information **sourcefulness, and self-sufficiency) continue to be important factors worthy of con**

Why Examine Information in Minimalist Lifestyles?

Minimalism is a philosophy that values *living with less*; choosing low-cost, low-impact alternatives over more expensive, materialistic options. People tend to embrace minimalist lifestyles by two methods: one driven by too many choices; the other driven by too few (Chin 2006).

The ‘**many choice**’ method sees people **voluntarily trade** consumeristic lifestyles for what they hope will be less complicated, more meaningful lives. Although minimalism takes many forms, popular minimalist practices carry familiar, marketable labels, including **simple living, downward mobility, voluntary simplicity, the 100-item challenge, and do-it-yourself (DIY)**, just to name a few. Successful minimalism-by-choice **necessitates being well informed** on a variety of economic, philosophic, social and environmental agendas.

The ‘**few choice**’ method sees people living in rural areas, often for generations, because they **lack the desire, the means, or the opportunity** to live

a more consumptive lifestyle. Populations living rurally by chance of birth appear, superficially, to exist in this manner due to socio-economic disadvantage (Federation of Canadian Municipalities 2006), resulting in labels that are generally far less trendy including **poor, cheap, thrifty, frugal, practical, and economical**. Yet, sustaining this minimalist lifestyle **requires one to learn many creative ways of ‘making do’**.

Although *less* is frequently viewed as *poor*, the minimalist lifestyle example suggests that this relationship may be somewhat misleading in this context, particularly with respect to information activities, skills and behaviors. This poster explores the phenomenon of minimalism in the remote, rural northern Ontario village of Whitney, Ontario and the Highway 60 corridor of Algonquin Park, and examines various information behaviors found in this context. **Can people who ‘live with less’ in this environment also be described as information poor?**

What Do We Know about Poverty and Information Behavior?

Information poverty is often contextualized in terms of the **lack of access to information technology resources** (Hersberger 2003) as in discussions of the **digital divide and socio-economic disadvantage**. This type of information poverty also includes a **literacy or technological deficit** component, as evidenced by an inability to “locate, evaluate, and use” the infrastructure, for example, an inability to type, or knowledge of how to use a computer (ALA, 2012).

Childers and Post (1975), described information poverty **culturally**, as characterized by 1) **insufficient processing skills** (due to low literacy levels, physical or mental impairments) 2) **lack of broader social awareness** of available resources and 3) attitude of **hopelessness that discourages information seeking**.

Elfreda Chatman’s studies into the everyday life information worlds of marginalized peoples (Chatman 1991; Chatman 1992; Chatman 1996; Chatman 1999) described information poverty from the perspective of the degree to which 4 **self-protective behaviors** exist. These behaviors are determined largely by social and cultural norms of a community.

Chatman’s information poverty behaviors include 1) **secrecy**, 2) **deception**, 3) **risk-taking** and 4) **situational relevance**. Situational behavior barriers contributing to information poverty include a **perceived lack of information sources**, a **class distinction** element, **self-protective behaviors**, **mistrust** of others intentions or ability, awareness of **negative consequences** for risk-taking behaviors, and **selective acceptance** of new information.

How Did I Study this Phenomenon and Context

Larger Doctoral Study

For my doctoral research project, titled “**Words to Live By: How Experience Shapes our Information World at Work, at Play and in Everyday Life**,” I use qualitative, ethnographic methods of inquiry including photo-voice, phot elicitation, and semi-structured interviews to explore how experience in everyday life becomes information. Environmental scanning of other primary and secondary documentary sources of information provide additional data.

Interviews with seventeen residents (aged 26 to 89) of the remote, rural community of Whitney, Ontario (near Algonquin Provincial Park) have been collected. Secondary sources of data consulted include several dozen non-fiction biographies, histories of the region, photographs and local artifacts. Data are being analyzed according to grounded theory using the constant comparative

method, whereby “incidents that are found to be conceptually similar” are given “the same conceptual label” until each emerging theme is fully elaborated (Corbin and Strauss 2008). **This poster presents a subset of findings** describing information poverty in a context not previously examined in LIS research.

This Subset of Data

The data collected thus far are analyzed for **examples of information activities**. Activities are categorized as belonging to either a **minimalist by chance** population or a **minimalist by choice** population. Resulting information activities are examined for similarities and differences between the two categories, and then further in relation to the **technological, behavioral and cultural** theories of information poverty described above. Conclusions are drawn.

Discoveries and Conclusions

Minimal living involves rejecting consumerism, materialism and outward expressions of wealth in everyday life. **This project examines whether those who live with less in this context can also be considered information poor.** Two populations were considered: those who live minimally by choice and those who do so by chance. Both populations live in similar and proximal contexts in terms of remoteness, isolation, and access to technology. The context is economically poor in many ways — more so for the minimalist by chance group. **Results indicate** that, despite some overlap with information poverty profiles, **neither group can be considered information poor**. Profiles do not account for the many successful information behaviors exhibited. **Psycho-social attitudes (such as optimism, creativity, curiosity, resourcefulness, and self-sufficiency) continue to be important factors** to consider when examining states of information poverty and wealth.

Minimal living by choice does not appear to be related to information poverty as described either by Hersberger, or by Childers and Post. There were physical challenges with accessing technology due to remoteness, however, people who chose to live with less in this context were a highly literate, financially stable, socially connected group of people. They could identify needs and source appropriate help both from within their community and from outside.

Minimal living by chance may be related to information poverty as described by Hersberger because it adds an (economic) barrier to access. However, it does not share key characteristics with Childers and Post’s description of information poverty. For example, isolation and fewer financial resources make accessing basic technology and continuing education difficult. However, those who lack credentialing in this context are not necessarily illiterate or uneducated. And while instances of negative affect came to light, no one expressed hopelessness about their situation.

Both groups exhibited elements of Chatman’s information poverty theory, however, enough anomalies surfaced to suggest that **neither group is truly information poor**. For example, although there were individual incidents of hostility, suspicion, or instability, the worlds are both **generally friendly, supportive, stable, open and positive**. Further, some secret behaviors were not self-protective mechanisms, but rather examples of **anonymous benevolence**. Similarly, deceptive behaviors were often centered around **humor and practical jokes**, rather than personal gain. And while neither group could be considered entirely a ‘Small World’ or a ‘Life in the Round’ by Chatman’s definition, both populations were **strongly connected to their community**. The ‘by choice’ group had a more **cosmopolitan worldview**, while the ‘by chance’ group had a more **local worldview**.

Both populations showed **positive affect toward the many benefits** associated with living in this context; foregoing other advantages in favour of these was perceived as a **worthwhile trade**. Positive attitudes toward information seeking often compensated for lack of information.

we were poor”

Information Rich Activity

information poverty in terms of insufficient economic, infrastructure, cultural, or
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How Does Minimal Living Map to Information Poverty Theory ?

Living with Less by Choice

Status: Cottagers, part time residents (historical accounts only).

Primary Residence: America, Elsewhere in Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland, BC

Occupations: Businessmen, Professors, Politicians/Ministers, Executives, Engineers, Physicians, Dentists, Architects, Diplomats, Ministers (Pastoral), Lawyers/Judges, Archaeologists, Pilots, Military Officers, Teachers, Engravers, Sailors

Technological Divide:

Historically, land-line **telephones** were available at a limited number of Department of Lands and Forests (DLF) bases. Railway stations provided **telegraph** service. **Letter mail/parcel service** was available through Canada Post. **Messengers** filled in gaps. Other **analog methods** of communication such as **lights, bells, and whistles** supplemented communication between neighbours in close enough proximity. Internet was not available to cottagers historically (pre-1990 data), but **cable, cell coverage and satellite service** is available in many locations today to cottagers/vacationers, at a cost. Service is improving, but still **regularly interrupted** due to power fluctuations.

Literacy/Processing Skills:

Education levels (Census Data): Education is self-explanatory by title, and suggests a **highly literate population**. This population is not captured in census data as they are not residents, and may not even be citizens. There were **no examples of disabled cottagers**, although falling ill was common (heart issues, whooping cough, tuberculosis, asthma, allergies, stomach ailments, as well as other unnamed illnesses which either occurred at the cottage or for which time at the cottage was 'prescribed'.)

Awareness of Information Sources:

Information sources included self, each other, park rangers, the park Superintendent, first nations people, locals, lease-holders association, Politicians, Department of Lands and Forests, Ontario Provincial Police. Resources were often carried in on foot, by sled, horse, boat, train, plane, or later, by car. Examples also indicate that **medical personnel and medication were flown in to treat residents in situ**.

Affective Component:

Examples of **negative affect** included **anger/upset** at vandalism to property and indifference of logging industry to cottagers interests, **guilt** for knowledge of poaching activities, **shock and sadness** at policy changes leading to the end of lease renewals (which essentially equaled eviction). Positive comments included, "...**once the place gets into your blood it fills your soul with a sense of wonder, peace and tranquility that is never found anywhere else**" (Clemson, 2001 p35). Other adjectives describing the experience include: **breathtaking, intense, wondrous, beautiful, fine, great fun, wonderful, marvelous, beloved**.

Secrecy, Deception, Risk Taking:

Examples of **secrecy and deception** centered around activities that were in **contravention of laws or DLF policies**. For example, attempts were made to keep information about poaching activities, or illegal use of government property/resources private. Examples of **deception** included accounts of locals who covered their identities while engaged in illegal activities that interfered with cottagers' enjoyment of property. There were also a number of examples of **exploiting information channels** (personal connections with high ranking people — like the Premier of Ontario) for community benefit. One example of **risk taking** saw a cottager inform the DFL of poaching activities carried out by family members.

There was **no evidence that the minimalist by choice population perceived themselves as lacking information resources**. This could be considered consistent with the class of occupations held by the cottagers.

Living with Less by Chance

Status: Full time residents, in many cases for several generations

Place of Origin: Poland, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Quebec, Scandinavia, Ontario

Occupations: Farming, Blacksmithing, Logging, Construction, Service/Accommodation, Other Tourism, Trapping, Guiding, Arts & Crafts, Park Rangers, Carpentry, Pilots, Public service, Military, Handymen, Land surveyors, Artists, Cooks, Delivery/transport, Barber

Technological Divide:

Residents shared similar historical communications technologies with the 'by choice group.' Land-line **telephones, fax, and cable**, are common, and those who can afford it now have access to **internet and cellular** service. **Internet** is also available at the public library (11 hours per week). Technology costs are higher than in urban centers, and service is subject to **regular outages** due to power fluctuations. **Acceptance** of technology varied.

Literacy/Processing Skills:

Education levels (Census Data): Most people are employed in **experience-based occupations** requiring **no formal education**. Some people are employed in **trade-based occupations** requiring **college education**. Many people are unemployed seasonally. Approximately 41% of the population does not have a high school diploma. However several older interviewees have undertaken to **write person biographies**, one of whom only finished grade 4 level education. Internet adoption was mixed, and mobile technologies were more popular among younger interviewees. **Disabilities** among residents include age-related illnesses, childhood polio, accidental injury or death, substance abuse, and other mental health issues.

Awareness of Information Sources:

Information sources include: self, each other, relatives (parent, child, siblings), elders in the community, first nations people, local 'experts', folk lore, acquaintances who lived/moved away, physicians (local and out of town), government agencies, publications, the internet, books, social gatherings, environment/nature, news sources, and trial and error.

Affective Component:

Examples of **negative affect** were primarily centered on experiences around **accident, illness, death, and substance abuse**. Positive affect was expressed toward the **willingness to help, simple, joyful experiences** (longterm relationships, self-sufficiency, friendship, family, outdoor activities like sports, campfires, tobogganing). Stories were recounted of **extreme poverty** (making clothes out of flour bags, sharing garments etc., **extreme weather, and difficult working conditions**, yet interviewees regularly stated that they **wouldn't trade their experiences** for any amount of money. In summarizing her experiences, one female interviewee noted **"We had nothing. But [it wasn't a problem because] we didn't know we were poor."**

Secrecy, Deception, Risk Taking:

In addition to **secrecy** surrounding activities that are in **contravention of laws or DLF policies, socially stigmatized conditions and activities** are kept secret or anonymous (for example, extreme poverty, substance abuse, mental health issues). Evidence also existed of **people helping others in secret** (i.e., providing resources like food, clothing, fuel etc.) when there is a known need. Other accounts of **secrecy** included **catching objects** (canoes, cooking instruments) in the forest. Accounts of **deception** centered around **humor** (practical jokes), and **purposefully confusing outsiders** directionally in the bush (such as sport fishermen) to safeguard location information and local guiding livelihoods.

Although physical resources were often lacking, there was **no evidence that the minimalist by chance population perceived themselves as lacking information resources**. This could be because their information needs are being met (known and met), or because the information needs are unknown (unknown and unmet).

Inspired and informed by...

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