A Tale of Two Degrees: The Potential for Small Worlds within Academia

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Abstract

Popularized by Elfreda A. Chatman, the theory of a small world, which refers to “a community of like-minded individuals who share co-ownership of social reality” (Chatman, 1999, p. 213), tends to be viewed in a negative light despite its possible benefits. This article examines the potential for the development of small worlds within the context of professional degree programs. This potential is explored primarily through the author’s personal experiences obtaining two professional degrees: a Bachelor of Education at Tyndale University College & Seminary and a Master of Library and Information Science at the University of Western Ontario. Using an auto-hermeneutic methodology, each of the four core concepts of Chatman’s small world theory – worldview, social norms, social types, and information behaviour – is investigated in detail through the lens of the author’s experiences. The possible advantages and disadvantages of a small world for students as well as the implications for practice are then discussed.

Keywords: Small worlds; Information behaviour; Education; Professional degrees; Auto-hermeneutics

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Introduction

Popularized by Elfreda A. Chatman, the concept of a “small world” refers to a society in which members not only share common opinions and concerns, but also understand each other because of the unique language and customs they share. Members have a collective awareness of who is important, who is trustworthy, and which ideas are relevant. “In its truest form, a small world is a community of like-minded individuals who share coownership of social reality” (Chatman, 1999, p. 213). However, a small world can also be defined as having a “specific context that serves a particular population to permit its members to conduct their business in a routine, expected manner” (Burnett, Besant, & Chatman, 2001, p. 536). Given this second definition, professional degree programs, which help students prepare for careers in specific fields, such as law, medicine, and education, might have the potential, due to their highly specialized focus, to provide the conditions necessary for the formation of a small world.

In this article I explore the potential for the creation of small worlds within the information rich context of academia through my experiences obtaining two professional degrees: a Bachelor of Education (BEd) and a Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS). Using an auto-hermeneutic methodology, I examine and compare the four core concepts necessary for the creation of a small world – common worldview, social norms, social types, and information behaviour – within the context of each professional degree program. I then consider which concepts are most pivotal to the development of a small world as well as the possible advantages and disadvantages for students should a small world develop.

Literature Review

Throughout Chatman's investigations of the information practices of low-income janitorial employees (1991), women living in a retirement center (1996), and inmates in a high-security women's prison (1999), she found that social conditions of marginalization can shape a group's information practices in highly localized ways. This includes the formation of small worlds, which can impact information practices in both positive and negative ways. For instance, in communities whose activities are stigmatized and/or of uncertain legal status, such as the extreme body modification community, potentially incriminating information can be freely shared among members because of the trusted and insular nature of a small world (Lingel & boyd, 2013, p. 982). Conversely, protecting stigmatized information within the confines of a small world limits the access other interested parties will have to that information, as it is only typically shared amongst those within the community (Lingel & boyd, 2013, p. 986).

However, it is not just the impoverished or marginalized that experience small worlds. A review of the literature shows that Chatman's theory of small worlds has been used to explore the situational information behaviours of post-disaster communities (Slagle, 2010) as well as the information practices of non-governmental organizations (Connor & Yerbury, 2017), Catholic clergy (Dankasa, 2017), virtual communities, and feminist booksellers (Burnett et al., 2001). Additionally, Chatman's theory has been applied in other contexts both to better understand various aspects of information behaviour (Jaeger & Burnett, 2008; Savolainen, 2009; Savolainen, 2016) and to better understand the often complex relationship between information and society (Burnett, Jaeger, & Thompson, 2008; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010). Given the fact that concepts such

as information poverty and information barriers are often closely associated with small worlds, it is not surprising that none of the above studies have examined the potential effects of a small world developing within a typically information-rich environment, such as academia.

“Information poverty” has been a concept in library and information science (LIS) since at least as far back as the 1960s (Yu, 2006). It should not be construed as necessarily resulting from economic poverty; while the two can be linked, information poverty can also exist separate and apart from economic poverty. For instance, Hersberger (2003) found that although homeless parents lacked the economic resources to live in stable housing, they “did not perceive themselves to be either information poor or affected directly by the lack of access to digital information” (p. 60). According to Yu (2010), “Information inequality needs to be understood thoroughly in informational terms before they are linked to factors in economic and social spheres” (p. 929). This fits with Chatman’s (1996) description of information poverty in relation to small worlds: “an impoverished information world is one in which a person is unwilling or unable to solve a critical worry or concern” (p. 197). Hence, information poverty does not necessitate economic poverty. In fact, “how people experience information poverty varies, but when people are information poor, they perceive a dearth of information resources that speak to their world view, are suspicious of information from outsiders, and engage in deception to maintain a sense of control over everyday life” (Lingel & boyd, 2013, p. 981). These sorts of behaviours may lead one to believe that those who experience a small world encounter information barriers related to social stigma and cultural taboo, such as feeling like an outsider, lacking social support, mistrusting

others, or concealing information due to societal prohibitions (Savolainen, 2016, p. 54). However, while this may be true in some cases, such as within the extreme body modification community, it is not usually the case. Typically, small world communities encounter information barriers due to sources of information being labeled as either useful or useless depending on how they reflect the community's values and beliefs, members avoiding information that could endanger their position within the community, and/or members being distrustful of information presented by people outside the community (Savolainen, 2016, p. 55). Thus, it is possible that, given the existence of a small world, even normally information rich environments can yield elements of information poverty and information barriers.

In order to properly explore a small world, one must look at it in light of its context. To that end, Pendleton and Chatman (1998) develops a conceptual framework for examining small worlds on the basis of four core concepts: (1) worldview, (2) social norms, (3) social types, and (4) information behaviour. The application of this conceptual framework “should provide essential clues to ways in which information is supported or denied by members of a cultural group” (Pendleton & Chatman, 1998, p. 743).

Worldview

Occasionally referred to as “ordered universes” in anthropology, “worldviews are the socially constructed realities humans use to frame perception and experience” (Johnson, Hill, & Cohen, 2011, p. 138). Derived from the German term *weltanschauung*, meaning “a view of the world,” worldviews share considerable conceptual overlap with both cultures and religions. Despite this overlap, though, worldviews stand apart from

both. For instance, unlike cultures, worldviews can refer to an individual's perceptual framework in addition to that of a group. Moreover, worldviews refer "only to the psychological, cognitive, and affective determinants of behavior and not to the artifacts, technologies, or institutions that may be included when discussing culture" (Johnson, Hill, & Cohen, 2011, p. 138). As for religion, Smart (2000) acknowledges that not all ideological systems are religious in nature. In fact, recently, researchers have begun to delve into how a worldviews perspective can help atheists, agnostics, and other non-religious individuals make sense of the world (Taves, Asprem, & Ihm, 2018).

Nevertheless, while there is a general consensus that worldviews are co-constructed ways of thinking about and interpreting the world, cultural anthropologists, philosophers, psychologists, and religious studies scholars have yet to come to a consensus about what constitutes a worldview. Johnson, Hill, and Cohen (2011) propose a comprehensive list of six psychological components that they believe shape the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours associated with an individual's worldview (see Table 1). This list, which synthesizes most previous lists of the various aspects that comprise worldviews, is useful for more fully understanding the specific characteristics of a worldview.

TABLE 1: Proposed Components of a Worldview (Johnson, Hill, & Cohen, 2011, p. 143)	
Worldview Component	Description
Ontology	Beliefs about who or what is in the world; [includes] other branches of metaphysics: theology, cosmology (origins), and the nature of the self
Epistemology	What can be known and how one should reason
Semiotics	Symbols, gestures, and language used to conceptualize and describe the

	world; time, space, and meaning
Axiology	Proximate goals, values, and ethics; includes beliefs about human action; good and evil; beliefs about change
Teleology	Ultimate goals, beliefs about the afterlife, and consequences of action; predicated on beliefs about originals (cosmology)
Praxeology	Social norms and sanctions in a community, informed by the foregoing beliefs, values, and ultimate goals

In the context of a small world, however, a worldview specifically refers to a set of beliefs that shape, change, and modify individuals' perceptions about the world "to correspond to what other members perceive as significant about that world" (Burnett et al., 2001, p. 537). "It serves as a measure to gauge one's role, position, status, etc., within a network of similar others" (Pendleton & Chatman, 1998, p. 736). According to Goffman (1959), a worldview gives members "a communal approach to the events and activities that occur in their social milieu" (p. 537). In this way, an individual's sense of self is formed by their worldview, which "accepts certain ways in which to speak, behave, and accept or reject information" (Chatman, 1999, p. 211). Thus, the worldview of an individual within a small world is highly contextualized and focuses not on the individual's perceptual framework in addition to that of a group, but rather the group's perceptual framework as it relates to the individual's role, position, and status within the group.

Social Norms

Social norms are the glue of human societies and institutions. According to Chudek and Henrich (2011), this means that what holds cooperative social arrangements together is the tendency of individual humans to do things the way others in the group do them, or

rather, the way others in the group expect each individual to do them. The binding power of social norms is thus derived not from any form of implied or actual physical force, but “from the mutual expectations within the social group to which each individual, at least implicitly, agrees to bind himself or herself” (Schmidt & Tomasello, 2012, p. 232). A society’s “tightness” or “looseness” can also be gauged in terms of how clearly their social norms are defined and how strongly they are enforced. For instance, a tight society would be highly disciplined and have a low tolerance for deviant behaviour, whereas a loose society would lack discipline and have a high tolerance for deviant behaviour (Gelfand, 2012). Generally speaking, there are three types of social norms: moral, conventional, and constitutive.

Nicols (2004) argues that moral norms derive much of their normative influence from the fact that they are in line with humans’ natural aversion towards harming others and natural attraction towards helping others. Thus, moral norms are generally understood as the already existing values of helping others and not inflicting harm on others. For example, moral norms prohibit killing or injuring other people, stealing from other people, and breaking promises to other people. Conventional norms, the violation of which would involve no direct harm or victimization, generally stem from humans’ desire to conform and belong (Schmidt & Tomasello, 2012, p. 232). For example, conventional norms prohibit “wearing gender-inappropriate clothing (e.g., men wearing dresses), licking one’s plate at the dinner table, and talking in a classroom when one has not been called on by the teacher” (Kelly, Stich, Haley, Eng, & Fessler, 2007, p. 117). Constitutive norms are a specific type of conventional norm that to some degree actually create new social realities, typically in the form of “X counts as Y in context C”

(Searle, 1995, p. 55). For example, police, legitimated by the “consent of the governed,” are entitled to all kinds of behaviours that would not be tolerated if exhibited by private citizens (Schmidt & Tomasello, 2012, p. 233).

In the context of a small world, social norms are the day-to-day customary patterns (i.e., activities and behaviours) that define membership within a small world. Members understand that “following these norms will bring order to the group, while deviating from them will bring chaos” (Dankasa, 2017, p. 248). It is less about doing what is common and more about doing what is expected (i.e., not the normal, but the normative) (Morris, Hong, Chiu, & Liu, 2015, p. 3). Additionally, embedded within these social norms is the notion of code:

A code defines the everyday routine activities of those who share it. *Code* connects [individuals] to other members of our world, while at the same time separating [them] from the world of outsiders. The code of a social and information system is what conveys a coherent account of that community in time and space. (Chatman, 1999, p. 211; emphasis from original)

These social norms, and the code that defines them, set the boundaries of a small world, which most members refrain from crossing (Burnett et al., 2001, p. 537), thus creating a tight and orderly society.

Social Types

Social types are “persons who exhibit traits or characteristics that distinguish them from other members of their world” (Chatman, 1999, p. 214). These typological distinctions are informed by the values defined by a small world’s social norms and embody an ideal image of “behaving, conversing, and otherwise interacting with others” (Burnett et al.,

2001, p. 537). For example, in her study of inmates at a maximum-security prison, Chatman (1999) notes the social type known as “bitch guards.” These are guards who are “especially disliked for their demoralizing attitude toward prisoners and their ability to provide favors to selected inmates at the expense of others” (Pendleton & Chatman, 1998, p. 739). Thus, inmates view “bitch guards” as potentially dangerous, fear being punished by them, and generally try to avoid them (Pendleton & Chatman, 1998, pp. 739-740). Overall, the social types classification scheme provides members of a small world with “a standard by which to judge public behavior” and thereby anticipate both how identified persons will behave and how members are expected to interact with them (Chatman, 1999, p. 214).

Information Behaviour

Wilson (2000) defines information behaviour as “the totality of human behavior in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking and information use” (p. 49). Thus, information behaviour includes purposeful information seeking and serendipitous information encounters, as well as the giving, sharing, and using of information. In the context of a small world, however, information behaviour can be defined simply as “a state in which one may or may not act on available or offered information” (Burnett et al., 2001, p. 537). This is because one’s worldview not only shapes the way they speak or behave, but also whether they accept or reject information (Chatman, 1999, p. 211).

According to Chatman, this means that when it comes to seeking information, members of a small world will not cross the boundaries set by their social norms. This creates an extremely localized lifestyle in which members primarily rely on personal

experiences and hearsay from trusted individuals to meet their information needs (Chatman, 1999, p. 215). Furthermore, the flow of information within a small world may be “most closely related to the perception of expertise” (Burnett et al., 2001, p. 544). Dankasa’s study of Catholic clergy in Northern Nigeria supported these assertions and showed the negative effects they can have on the variety of information clergy are able to acquire. “When the clergy do not cross the boundaries of their world to seek essential information, it hinders access to relevant information that outsiders possess, and may subsequently lead to information poverty” (Dankasa, 2017, p. 257). However, in her “Theory of Life in the Round,” Chatman allows for the possibility that members of small worlds may seek information outside the boundaries of their world if, and only if, the information is deemed critical, collectively relevant, or there is a perception that their society is no longer functioning (1999, pp. 214-215). For instance, Dankasa finds that while clergy will seek information concerning their ministry, pastoral problems, and issues regarding the Church only from fellow clergy, they would willingly cross boundaries for information “concerning things and events such as politics, health, security and products to buy” (2017, p. 255).

Research Questions

As discussed previously, there have not yet been any studies that have examined the potential effects of a small world developing within a typically information rich environment. Such studies could potentially offer new insights into the formations of small worlds as well as expand current understandings of the possible advantages and disadvantages of small worlds. I therefore intend to contribute to the current literature by exploring these issues through a close examination of the four core concepts of small

worlds as they relate to students seeking to acquire professional degrees. I chose this group to study for three reasons. First, academia is typically an information-rich environment wherein individuals are consistently encouraged to engage with new and diverse information. Second, the specific contexts and routines of professional degree programs appear to provide the conditions necessary for the formation of a small world. Third, having attained two separate professional degrees, I have a basis for comparison, which informs this discussion. My research questions are as follows:

1. Do professional degree programs have the potential to create small worlds as described by Chatman?
2. Which of the four core concepts associated with small worlds are most essential to the creation of small worlds?
3. What are the potential advantages and disadvantages of small worlds within the realm of professional degree programs?

Methodology

Numerous researchers in the social sciences argue that “studying an individual part can lead to an understanding of something greater” (Gorichanaz, 2017, p. 1). For instance, Bromley (1986) argues that the single-case study is a legitimate and valuable method of scientific inquiry, particularly when it comes to studying cases in their real-world contexts. Likewise, Bruner (1986) praises narrative research as one of the ways through which humans can know and reason. Beyond these two standpoints, though, there are other compelling reasons for researchers to study the self.

First, automethodologies are convenient, as researchers have ongoing access to themselves. This allows for “longitudinal, demanding, and speculative—perhaps even invasive—research that might otherwise be difficult to conduct” (Gorichanaz, 2017, p. 2). Second, in using automethodologies, researchers have access to their own thoughts. This potentially allows for “deeper and more precise and accurate data collection” (Gorichanaz, 2017, p. 2). Third, automethodologies may be uniquely suited to revealing previously obfuscated aspects of the social sciences, such as discipline-specific biases (Gorichanaz, 2017, p. 2).

The most well known automethodology in LIS is probably autoethnography, which can be defined as “a qualitative research method that utilizes ethnographic methods to bring cultural interpretation to the autobiographical data of researchers with the intent of understanding self and its connection to others” (Chang, 2008, p. 56). These kinds of studies (Michels, 2010; Polkinghorne, 2012; Grace & Sen, 2013; Guzik, 2013; Lopatovska & Smiley, 2014) are often carried out by researchers seeking to improve practice. Another automethodology worth noting is self-study, which “holds that only through the close examination of one's own practice can that practice be improved” (Gorichanaz, 2017, p. 2). Unlike autoethnography, though, self-study not only draws on multiple methodologies and traditions, it can also be employed collaboratively. For example, a group of educators who engage individually in self-study can compare their findings and learn from each other, thus furthering the practice of the cohort as a whole (Lassonde, Galman, & Kosnik, 2009). However, neither autoethnography nor self-study “has been able to address ontological questions regarding the essence of information phenomena” (Gorichanaz, 2017, p. 2). Therefore, Gorichanaz (2017) proposes that

auto-hermeneutics, which builds off of hermeneutics' modern incarnation as an empirical, phenomenological research approach, would be well suited to answering such questions: "Auto-hermeneutics would be advisable for researchers who, for example, have had information experiences that have yet to be documented in the literature... [or] may also reveal novel perspectives on contexts that have already been studied" (Gorichanaz, 2017, p. 4).

According to Dennett (1992), "It is also possible for a person to engage in auto-hermeneutics, interpretation of one's self, and in particular to go back and think about one's past, and one's memories, and to rethink them and rewrite them" (pp. 5–6). However, Benjamin (2014) cautions that a researcher engaging in auto-hermeneutics must have a high degree of self-awareness or mindful inquiry, a concrete means of describing one's subjective inner experiences, and advanced training in qualitative research (pp. 249-250). Furthermore,

Maxwell (2005) suggests collecting rich data, searching for discrepancies in evidence, triangulating data from multiple sources and modalities, comparing findings between data sources to those in the literature that may be applicable, and carefully and completely describing the context, background, and values of the researcher. (Gorichanaz, 2017, p. 5)

Following these best practices will help researchers avoid potential automethodology pitfalls such as an overemphasis on narrative at the expense of analysis and excessive reliance on memory (Holt, 2003). Finally, Gorichanaz (2017) asserts that researchers employing auto-hermeneutic methods must ensure that their research questions are appropriate for the methodology. "They should seek to explore elements of experience,

not necessarily searching for why or how something occurs, and should focus on the experience of an individual rather than a group” (Gorichanaz, 2017, p. 5).

As a former teacher trained in the use of reflective practice, who also regularly documented and reflected upon their experiences in the form of periodic journal entries during both their BEd and MLIS training, I believe I meet Benjamin’s requirement of self-awareness. As a current PhD student, I believe I also meet his requirement of advanced research training. In order to meet his final requirement regarding a concrete means of describing one’s inner experiences, I have examined the reflective journal entries I wrote during each degree, confirmed specific details of my experiences as much as possible through additional documents (i.e., forum posts, class notes, assignments, syllabi, photos, etc.) as well as by asking others who were my peers in the programs to review my writings, and utilized supporting literature as Maxwell suggests. Having taken these steps, I hope to provide a thorough and true account of my experiences obtaining both professional degrees, with a particular focus on answering the research questions enumerated above.

Findings

Prior to the exploration of the four core concepts associated with small worlds, it is necessary to address the idea of location. Wilson (1983) states, “Like the clothes one wears, the food one eats, the accent and vocabulary of one’s speech, so also the things one is informed about and the questions on which one has views are all influenced by social location” (p. 149). In her study of inmates at a maximum-security prison for women, Chatman (1999) notes that the circumstances of prison-life heavily influences the inmates’ worldview, social norms, and recognition of social types. Thus, it is

important to foreground this discussion by describing the locations where each degree was obtained.

I completed my BEd at Tyndale University College & Seminary, a private Christian university of approximately 1,600 students located in Toronto, Ontario (Tyndale, 2018). During the time of study, from 2011-2012, Tyndale's Education program consisted of approximately 65 students as well as 15 instructors/administrators, and it was hosted off campus at Morrow Park Motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Joseph (admin, 2011).¹ It was an intense 12-month, full-time program that began in July and ran straight through to the following June.

From 2016-2018, I undertook an MLIS at the University of Western Ontario, one of Canada's largest and highest ranked public universities, which is located in London, Ontario (Blog of Lists, 2013; QS Top Universities, 2017). In the 2016/17 school year, a total of 205 students (140 full-time and 65 part-time) were enrolled in the MLIS program (Western Databook 2017, 2017b). A total of 209 students (155 full-time and 54 part-time) were enrolled the following academic year (Western Databook 2017, 2017b). As an addition data point, for the past five years, the MLIS program has consistently represented approximately 62 percent of the graduate students enrolled in Western's Faculty of Information and Media Studies (Western Databook 2017, 2017a). This is important insofar as it means the MLIS students in the program share vital facilities, like the FIMS Graduate Library, with non-MLIS students and therefore may be less socially isolated than students in other professional degree programs.

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¹ It should be noted that these numbers are based on my recollections in conjunction with supporting documents. They do not reflect current enrollment statistics because Tyndale's Education program has undergone significant growth and change since I completed my BEd in 2012.

The MLIS program currently employs 19 faculty members, 9 full-time and 10 limited duties (Faculty of Information & Media Studies [FIMS], 2018), and it offers three entry points, full-time and part-time study options, and numerous co-operative education (co-op)² placement opportunities (FIMS, 2018b). Furthermore, it should be noted that during the time of study, I attended classes at the previous FIMS location in Western's North Campus Building as well as its new location in Western's FIMS & Nursing Building, both of which are centrally situated on Western's main campus.

Comparatively, the locations of these two professional degree programs are quite different. The BEd was obtained in a small, isolated, and community-oriented environment, whereas the MLIS was obtained in a larger, more diversified environment. Thus, the BEd provided a much more ideal location for the formation of a small world. However, program-wise, it is possible that an MLIS cohort³ – which is generally smaller than that of Tyndale's BEd cohorts – could collectively finish the program within the span of three terms (i.e., 12 months), assuming all students took five courses per term and did not complete a co-op placement. In this case, the odds of the cohort forming a small world would significantly increase, particularly if the cohort members were all interested in pursuing the same branch of librarianship (i.e., academic, archival, or public).⁴

Worldview

The worldviews of both the BEd and the MLIS' programs were based primarily on students' understanding of academic scholarship, such as the notions that knowledge is

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² A co-op is a work experience designed to complement one's academic studies.

³ A cohort is a group of students who begin a particular university program at the same time.

⁴ It is worth noting, though, that the MLIS students would still lack the acute sense of isolation experienced during my BEd.

obtained through a strong work ethic and a willingness to learn. These worldviews were then further developed through the incorporation of the beliefs and values upheld by each profession (i.e., what it means to be a teacher or a librarian). In the case of the BEd program, these beliefs and values were heavily influenced by the concept of student-centred learning⁵ and Tribes Learning Communities.⁶ For the MLIS program, these beliefs and values were chiefly derived from the Faculty's mission statement and the American Library Association's standards for "professional practice and associated areas of study and research" (American Library Association [ALA], 2015, p. 2). Thus, within the specific context of the school environment, students in both degree programs knew what to expect in terms of a communal approach towards the professions they were studying. This remained the extent of the worldview in the MLIS program, but in the BEd program, the additional dimension of a shared religion among the majority of participants created an even more pronounced worldview.

The dictionary defines religion as "an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god or a group of gods" (Merriam-Webster, 2018). However, cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1979) would describe it more broadly as a "system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence" (p. 78). In this sense, religion is not simply a part of an individual or group's worldview, but rather an *orienting* part of that worldview. "That is, the important thing about religious worldviews is their ability to guide goals and behaviors" (Peterson, 2001,

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⁵ This term is used to describe methods of teaching that shift the focus of instruction from teacher to student, with the aim of developing learner autonomy and independence.

⁶ This is a method of classroom management designed to develop compassionate future citizens capable of creating, leading, and contributing to democratic communities (Gibbs, 2018).

p. 13). In Christianity, there is a shared belief about how the world was created (Genesis 1-2:3 New Revised Standard Version) and what it means to be human (Acts 17: 26, 28; Ephesians 2:10). There is also a shared sense of fellowship through ceremonies of worship (Acts 2:41-47) as well as expectations for how Christians will live out their faith in their day-to-day lives (Exodus 20:1-17; Mark 12:28-31). Thus, Christianity not only fits Geertz's definition, but also proves to be an orienting part of a worldview in that it permeates all aspects of life, not simply those related to a particular context, such as the education profession.

This shared, orientating belief system, I noticed, created conditions favourable to the development of a closer community, since major aspects of the worldview existed both within and outside the specific context of the academic environment. For example, in addition to socializing outside of the classroom, we often worshiped and prayed together. I also noticed these closer community ties throughout my practicum placements with the York Catholic District School Board in York Region, Ontario, where religious teaching was a key component of everyday lessons and life. In fact, in my second placement, I discovered that many of my students attended the same church I did every Sunday. It is quite possible that these closer community ties could enhance the potential for the development of a small world.

Social Norms

Given the academic nature of professional degrees, the social norms of the BEd and MLIS programs were very similar in that they were both governed primarily by school schedules, appropriate classroom behaviour, and homework expectations. These social norms, which students understood through their shared worldview, helped formulate

structured routines and activities that defined the boundaries of the professional degree programs. However, as discussed in the previous section, the moral and conventional norms experienced in the BEd program extended beyond the bounds of the academic environment and, therefore, were even more favourable to the development of a closer community.

Social Types

As with social norms, it is the academic nature of the professional degree programs that most profoundly influences the creation of social types, since these typological distinctions are primarily informed by a small world's values system. The social types I found to be common to both the BEd and the MLIS programs are: the "Instructor," the "Expert," the "Administrator," and the "Student."⁷

Both the Instructor and the Expert are teaching roles, but where the Instructor's methods are grounded primarily in theory, the Expert's are grounded primarily in the practical, hands-on knowledge they have gained through working in the profession. While it is possible that the Instructor may not have worked within the profession associated with the program in which they are teaching, it is common within professional degree programs for both Instructors and Experts to have done so. Therefore, the clearest delineation between the two roles is that Instructors do not currently work within their profession, while Experts do. For example, a professor who spends their time teaching and researching would be an Instructor, while a practicing professional with a specific expertise (i.e., differentiated instruction in the BEd program or readers' advisory in the MLIS program) would be an Expert. The Administrator is a

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⁷ Of course, the exact nature of these social types did vary according to the professional degree.

bureaucratic role describing a person who oversees, coordinates, and manages the program and/or the paperwork generated by it. Lastly, the Student is the participant's role, which, in this context, describes a person who is seeking to obtain a professional degree through a willingness to learn, study, and work hard.

In addition to these social types, the BEd also had that of the "Faithful," which describes a person who so closely adhered to the Christian worldview that they could be called Christ-like. Members would seek the Faithful out for spiritual guidance as opposed to professional or academic guidance. It is worth noting, though, that this social type is not as easily delineated as the others. For instance, while an outsider could potentially spot an Instructor or Student based on where they situate themselves in a classroom, they would not be able to casually spot a Faithful as this individual could be amongst either the staff or the students.

Information Behaviour

As previously stated, there are extremely few reasons members of small worlds would seek information outside the boundaries of that world. Given that the BEd and MLIS programs would not exist if a) they did not function or b) they did not provide critical information, one can reasonably assume that when it comes to professional degree programs, Students will strictly adhere to what the Instructors and Experts teach them about how to fulfill the duties of their specific profession. This, in turn, implies that the Students themselves will not need to cross the boundaries set by their social norms. In my experience, this was true of the BEd program, but not the MLIS program. I believe this occurred for two reasons. First, the closer community ties of the BEd program meant that the Students perceived a greater distinction between those who were

“insiders” and those who were “outsiders.”⁸ Thus, the trust between the Students and the staff of the BEd program was greater in comparison to that experienced in the MLIS program. As a result, the BEd Students were less inclined to accept any information or ideas they encountered that contradicted what they were being taught. Redfield supports this notion, stating that the ways small world members deal with problems “have become so interrelated with [their] communal perspective that there is little need to consider them objectively or critically” (as cited in Chatman, 1999, p. 211).

Second, MLIS Students were perhaps more likely to cross information boundaries because the librarian profession actively promotes open-mindedness and information seeking. Not only is the MLIS program designed to maximize course choices,⁹ but MLIS Instructors and Experts also enthusiastically encourage Students to pick topics related to their own interests for research. Dankasa (2017) emphasizes this professional desire to promote information seeking in his study’s conclusion by discussing how information professionals and seminary educators can work to prevent the small world information behaviours he witnessed (p. 257). Additionally, MLIS Instructors freely admitted their lack of knowledge on specific topics and often brought in outside Experts to fill in those knowledge gaps, which almost never happened during

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⁸ Insiders can be thought of as central figures within a small world who help shape its worldview and social norms, whereas outsiders can be thought of as those who do not belong, such as strangers or tourists (Chatman, 1999, p. 210).

⁹ In comparison, the BEd program offered minimal choice, separating students only by teaching divisions (i.e., Primary/Junior (Grades K-6) or Junior/Intermediate (Grades 4-10)) and religion class (general Christian or Catholic). Granted, the Junior/Intermediate students were further sub-divided by teachable, but those courses were designed to build on the knowledge gained in subject specific courses (i.e., language and literature, math, science, etc.). For the most part, particularly in the first two months of the degree, classes were attended together as a single community.

my experience in the BEd program. Instead, BEd Instructors were often lauded as the reigning experts in their respective field regardless of whether or not this was true.¹⁰

Discussion

Question 1: Do professional degree programs have the potential to create small worlds as described by Chatman?

In light of my experiences obtaining a BEd and an MLIS, it appears that academia, at least within the realm of professional degree programs, does have the potential to create small worlds. Both the BEd and the MLIS degree programs clearly demonstrated common worldviews, social norms, and social types typically associated with Chatman's concept of small worlds. However, it would be fair to say that my BEd experience exemplified the traits of a small world more so than my MLIS experience, as it further demonstrated information behaviours typically associated with Chatman's concept of small worlds.

Question 2: Which of the four core concepts associated with small worlds are most essential to the creation of small worlds?

Given the differences I experienced in attaining my two professional degrees, I believe my BEd experience more closely resembled a small world because of the small, isolated, and community-oriented environment; the added presence of shared religious beliefs and values; and the lack of encouragement from Instructors to cross informational boundaries. Thus, of the four core concepts (worldview, social norms, social types, and information behaviour), the two that appear to have had the most influence determining the creation of small worlds are worldview and information behaviour. The importance of worldview here is likely unsurprising since it informs both

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¹⁰ It is worth noting that in a few specific cases – such as with our math Instructor, Trevor Brown – this was true.

a group's social norms – which in turn inform their social types – and information behaviour. In fact, in determining key psychological processes, some researchers have argued that people's worldviews can determine these attributes more so than their cultural affiliations (Johnson, Hill, & Cohen, 2011, p. 139). It is a bit surprising, however, that information behaviour outranks social norms, given that social norms have been shown to strongly influence a group's tightness or looseness (Gelfand, 2012). Yet, in light of the fact that the social norms associated with professional degree programs are firmly grounded in the academic environment, and not necessarily the home life, a dichotomy between the professional and the personal can emerge. As Cooling (2010) argues, this can be particularly evident when religion is involved:

To be a professional has been judged to mean that you privatize your faith and respect the higher authority of academic objectivity; you keep the sacred and the secular aspects of your life in carefully labelled compartments, recognizing the superiority of the latter over the former. (p. 19)

Thus, the small world information behaviour, which naturally creates barriers that reinforce members' reliance on the community rather than themselves or others, can have a larger impact than social norms on a group's tightness or looseness within the academic environment. The modern tendency to separate the professional from the personal might also explain why the BEd program more closely resembled a small world, since there was no need for such a separation. To speak of a religious vocation to teach at Tyndale would have been met with support, rather than discomfort. Furthermore, the lack of such a separation probably fostered more trust between the

Students and the Instructors, which would have naturally increased the perceived credibility of the information the Instructors provided (Chatman, 1999, p. 215).

Additionally, in light of my experiences, I would propose that location, although not formally recognized as one of the four core concepts in Pendleton and Chatman's (1998) conceptual framework for examining small worlds, plays a vital role in the development of a small world. For example, because of the intense isolation and continuous daily interactions that defined my BEd program environment, our cohort formed much stronger personal bonds than my MLIS cohort, which fragmented as common classes lessened. As Shils (1957) puts it, "Man is much more concerned with what is near at hand, with what is present and concrete than with what is remote and abstract. He is more responsive on the whole to persons, to the status of those who surround him" (p. 130). In a study on nursing students, the environment and culture of the program were shown to be foundational sources of knowledge whereby students developed their self-concept as a nurse by "taking it all in" (Ware, 2008, p. 9). Thus, I believe it would be fair to say that location, particularly within the realm of academia, has a significant impact on determining the everyday things that require our attention.

In fact, if one were to conceptualize location more broadly as the university rather than simply the building in which the professional degree program's classes are held, one could easily see how location has the potential to shape all four core concepts of a small world. For example, Tyndale's incorporation of Christian faith influenced Students' worldview (i.e., religious beliefs and values were incorporated), social norms (i.e., saying Grace before meals), and social types (i.e., the Faithful). Likewise, Western's policies and practices shaped Students' understanding of the university's worldview

(i.e., a culture of excellence) and social norms (i.e., a smoke-free environment).

Moreover, in both cases, the universities have a considerable say in what information Students have access to through the specific policies and budgets that govern their libraries' print and digital collections. This can affect Students' information behaviour if they believe there is a lack of relevant resources available to them, as it will make them less inclined to perform serendipitous searches, which will, in turn, make Students more dependant upon their Instructors' information provision. Thus, location has the ability to affect the four core concepts of a small world and may warrant further consideration as a potential fifth core concept when examining small worlds.

Question 3: What are the potential advantages and disadvantages of small worlds within the realm of professional degree programs?

Regardless of how they come to exist, many scholars note that small worlds yield both positive and negative effects for their members. In terms of positive characteristics, Garfinkel (1964) notes that small worlds provide an intense familiarity through routine events (p. 225). This is beneficial because routines create a sense of predictability and control, which can increase an individual's ability to cope with stress (Sjostrand, 2018). Likewise, Dervin and Greenberg (1972) note that small worlds create an insulated system that provides "functional benefits to its members" (as cited in Burnett et al., 2001, p. 536). The insulated system formed from common beliefs can also improve an individual's ability to cope with stress, since they understand how the society functions and can trust others to work towards maintaining that functionality. When it comes to professional degree programs Students gain a sense of routine through their schedules and a sense of communal order through the social norms in which they participate.

Another benefit of small worlds is that they create a sense of community. As Kochen (1989) notes, the term small world is derived from “the frequently heard comment of two freshly made acquaintances, on discovering that they have an acquaintance in common: ‘it is a small world, isn’t it?’” (p. vii). The stress Students can feel while trying to obtain a professional degree is thus further lessened by knowing that they are not alone in their struggles (Alvord, Uchino, & Wright, 2018). Additionally, “the experience of belonging” can facilitate the development of a Student’s “confidence and professionalism” (Del Prato, 2013, p. 287). Professionals similarly find comfort in a shared worldview that allows them to speak about their experiences without worrying about how to explain specific aspects. For example, “Conservative Christians may share a similar language with non-Christians; yet Biblical terms such as righteousness, sin, or sanctification may further shape their perceptions of the world in ways unfamiliar to or rejected by secularists” (Johnson, Hill, & Cohen, 2011, p. 146). Professionals can also find comfort in the fact that those who share their worldview will be better able to help them. For example, Dankasa (2017) finds that for some matters, such as issues regarding the Church, most clergy prefer to seek information from other clergy rather than lay people (p. 253).

In terms of negative characteristics, small worlds can limit an individual’s view of the larger social world (Burnett et al., 2001, p. 536). During her study of inmates at a maximum-security prison for women, inmates told Chatman (1999) “the best way to survive is ‘not to keep up with the outside’” (p. 212). This kind of mindset creates social isolation and blocks “the way for value exchange, for sharing and mutual construction of values, and for encounter and dialogue between people from different [groups]”

(Miedema, 2013, p. 237). Students are vulnerable to this kind of social isolation when they lack exposure to diverse ideas and methodologies regarding their profession. This can potentially lead to them being unable to work with those they consider to be “other.” For example, a librarian who is unaccustomed to interacting with homeless people may struggle to appropriately engage with a homeless patron if it has not been part of their training.

Another negative characteristic of small worlds is their limiting effects on information seeking, which results in constrained viewpoints that rely on personal experiences and hearsay from trusted individuals as well as an unwillingness to consider problems objectively or critically. This type of behaviour can lead to outside information and ideas being mostly ignored in favour of that which conforms to the group’s worldview:

Although one might, for instance, make use of some tidbit of information from the larger world for casual conversation with a neighbor or friend, the purpose might simply be to measure the overall soundness of the world “out there,” to maintain a connection, or to engage in “small-talk.” (Burnett et al., 2001, p. 537)

This can occur when Students are not encouraged to seek out and critically consider alternative perspectives and can lead to the formation of echo chambers.¹¹

Thus, the development of small worlds within the realm of professional degree programs can be beneficial in that they decrease stress while also creating a supportive community that fosters confidence and professionalism. However, the trade-off is that

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¹¹ An echo chamber is an environment where people only encounter opinions similar to their own, and where contradictory or alternative opinions are not considered (Reed, 2019).

small worlds often also create barriers to information. This can result in Students being more closed-minded and less willing to consider new ideas and methods related to their area of practice.

Implications for practice

Small worlds are not inherently bad. In fact, as demonstrated above, they provide a number of benefits to their members. However, the information behaviours they naturally cultivate can potentially be highly detrimental to practicing professionals when they leave the insulating confines of their professional degree programs for the real world work environment. Thus, it is important for these kinds of programs to strike a balance between nurturing a communal and supportive environment while at the same time encouraging diversity, cooperation, independence, and critical thinking in their students. As Miedema (2013) states, “Being a member of a particular organization, group, or community should strengthen the identity of persons and should support them in making them ready and prepared for living, working, and learning together with [those they consider to be] ‘other’” (p. 238).

So, what can universities do to work towards this goal? Given my experiences, I would recommend three things. First, professional degree programs should encourage diversity both in terms of the perspectives they teach and their student recruitment initiatives. Diverse perspectives in theory and practice can enhance students’ abilities to think critically and creatively when they encounter issues in the work environment. Including students from all sorts of cultural and religious backgrounds will also expose students to unique ideas and perspectives they may never have encountered before.

This can strengthen their ability to understand and empathize with people who have different worldviews.

Second, these programs should not only provide as much self-directed choice as possible, both in terms of courses and assignments, but also foster communal and cooperative environments. Through self-directed choice, students are able to explore topics and issues that are relevant to their personal interests. This will allow them to nurture their individual gifts and talents, while also helping them to build connections between theory and practice. Furthermore, having these options available will force students to think critically about the choices they are making. For example, an MLIS student may decide after taking courses in both academic librarianship and children's librarianship that they prefer one branch over the other and thereafter only choose courses that will improve their chances of getting a job in their preferred branch of librarianship. This independence should be balanced with in-class group discussions and activities as well as group assignments. Such group tasks will hopefully help students to build the communal relationships and trust necessary to create a supportive community, which will lessen stress and promote both students' confidence and sense of professionalism.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, these programs need to encourage students to develop their information seeking skills. In order to avoid detrimental small world information behaviour such as relying solely on personal experiences or hearsay from trusted individuals, being unwilling to consider problems objectively or critically, and refusing to consider new information or ideas, students need to be actively trained in how to locate and evaluate relevant information. Students need to understand that,

regardless of their chosen profession, as practicing professionals they will be required to engage with new information on an ongoing basis. For example, teachers should regularly read research related to new methods for aiding and engaging their students.

In order for professional degree programs to properly prepare their students for the workplace, they need to promote diversity, cooperation as well as independence, and information seeking skills. These things will undoubtedly help students to become better empathizers, critical thinkers, and, ultimately, professionals.

Conclusion

Overall, this exploration of my experiences obtaining a BEd and an MLIS demonstrates that professional degree programs do indeed have the potential to create small worlds. However, as the two experiences show, this potential is conditional. A sense of isolationism in terms of location is preferable, but more importantly, there needs to be a common understanding of worldview, social norms, social types, and limiting information behaviour for a small world to fully develop. Furthermore, my experiences demonstrate that worldview and information behaviour are likely the most significant factors regarding the development of a small world, since these are the areas where the differences were most clearly seen between the BEd (which did feel like a small world) and the MLIS (which did not¹²). Thus, I believe the notion that professional degree programs can, through their highly specialized focuses, create small worlds is worthy of further study. Specifically, future research could explore questions such as: How do co-op and/or practicum placements factor into students' perceptions of a small world? How

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¹² While I did not experience a small world during the completion of my MLIS, this does not preclude the possibility of others experiencing a small world while attempting to obtain the same degree, particularly in the event that they should be met with more favourable conditions.

does the existence of a small world impact students' preparedness for their careers? Are some professional degree programs more susceptible to the emergence of small worlds than others? These are just a few of the many questions that remain to be asked regarding the relationship between professional degree programs and small worlds.

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