

Paranormal Information Seeking In Everyday Life - Part II: An Outline of a Theory

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I am doing my licentiate's dissertation on the subject "seeking information on the paranormal", and at the moment, I am still in the middle of preparing the literature review for the study. Because of this, the conceptual and theoretical "machinery" — if one could (or even should) call it that — I am about to present here is by no means the final product, but rather a semifinished product which is still under construction. In this paper, I am going to discuss four topics: 1) what my study is all about and how it is located in our field of study — that is, in the field of information seeking studies, 2) what I am trying to find out with the study, 3) what the basic concepts that are utilized by the study are and how they could be defined, and 4) what kind of a theory these concepts might constitute.

The Setting of the Study

My licentiate's dissertation is a sequel to my master's thesis *Rajatiedon hankinnan arkipäivää — osa I* (or, *Seeking Paranormal Information In Everyday Life — Part I*) (Kari 1996). That is why the current study is entitled "Part II". My dissertation examines the information needs for and seeking of paranormal information among those Finns who are interested in the paranormal. The meaning of the concept *paranormal* is, I presume, at least vaguely familiar to all the readers, which is why its definition can wait.

An essential feature of my study is its focus on the individual person instead of an information system. This does not mean that the current paper is just another

presentation on methodological individualism. By no means is the individual understood here as an independent, autonomous subject, but rather as a semi-autonomous one. In principle, he or she makes his or her own choices, but interacts with other people through a semantic system — a language. What the focus on the individual does mean here is that I intend to study and get an understanding of information phenomena connected with the paranormal from the individual's point of view. I would like to emphasize, however, that ***my dissertation will not take any stand whatsoever on the existence of paranormal phenomena***. The informants' statements will be taken at their face value, without determining their truth-value.

Another central feature of my study is its concentration on information seeking in everyday life as opposed to occupational or professional information seeking. The study pays attention to the needs that prompt people to seek information on the paranormal on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to the psychological and social factors which affect this information seeking. All this will be accomplished by fixing the phenomena under study to a framework of way of life, mastery of life and sense-making.

In essence, the framework consists of two information seeking theories which are meant to complement each other: the sense-making theory (by Brenda Dervin; see for example Dervin 1992) and the model of Everyday Life Information Seeking (or, ELIS) (by Reijo Savolainen; see for example Savolainen 1993 or Savolainen 1995a). The sense-

making theory deals with how the individual accounts for his or her actions and makes sense of his or her environment in a given situation, and how seeking information serves "bridging the gaps" that continuously make our reality discontinuous. Among the principal thoughts of sense-making theory are: 1) the individual's life is discontinuous, i.e. life is not steady walking onwards along the road, but 2) interspersed with gaps (problems or instances of lack of information) which may have to be filled or bridged if the individual wants to carry on with his life. Gaps always occur in a certain situation, and this situation as well as the gap faced by the individual are examined as perceived by him, not by the researcher. The gap is bridged when the individual finds relevant information which enables him to cross the gap and remove (or at least relieve) the problem. This "situation-gap-use" triangle is the underlying foundation of the sense-making theory. (Dervin 1992)

Savolainen's framework of everyday information seeking is premised on altogether different ideas. Sense-making theory is predominantly interested in the various aspects of a situation and the individual in it, whereas Savolainen's theory focuses on the social aspects of the individual's life and their effect on his seeking information. The two basic concepts in this framework are "way of life" and "mastery of life". *Way of life* refers to the cognitive order of matters in the individual's mind, and is reflected by his 1) allocation of time to working time and leisure time, 2) consumption of goods, and 3) hobbies. *Mastery of life* means that the individual more or less constantly strives to keep things in the order in which they are in his mind. A major aspect of mastering one's life is solving everyday problems. The way in which these problems are solved and thus information sought depends directly not only on situational factors, but also on the cognitive style of the individual (Savolainen distinguishes four of these), his basic style of mastering his life. Both way of life and mastery of life are affected by more general factors such as the individual's conception of the world, his social class, financial capital, social capital, mental capital, age, and health. (Savolainen 1993, Savolainen 1995a, Savolainen 1995b)

The current study chiefly leans on the sense-making theory, because it better enables me to scrutinize the individual seeking information in a particular situation. The model of ELIS, however, is better suited to study general features of the individual's information activity. In my study, Dervin's theory will be linked together with Savolainen's model so that first, by making use of the model of ELIS, the conditions and "rules" of the

individual's information seeking practices will be found out. Then with the help of the sense-making theory, I will examine how the rules and information seeking style that the individual has internalized are realized in a single case - if they are realized at all.

The three paragraphs above provide a very brief account of the theoretical framework of my study. To be sure, it leaves the reader full of questions. Why not explicate the two theories further, in more detail? The reason why I do not want to do this is the startling realization that came to me after reading the manuscripts by Vakkari (1997) and Vakkari and Kuokkanen (1997). I suddenly became conscious of the fact that the theory of sense-making and the model of ELIS, which I had formerly regarded as unit theories, are in fact what Vakkari and Kuokkanen call "metatheories" - theories of theories. Just explaining in detail the two metatheories that my study is using would easily fill up the pages of a whole book.

Only now do I comprehend that I must construct a *unit theory* which would be specifically tailor-made to suit the purposes of my own research project. In practice, this means building a theory which takes the sense-making theory and the model of ELIS as its starting point. This new unit theory will only comprise of those elements in its metatheories that are necessary to facilitate answering the research questions. In addition, the theory to be constructed will be augmented by some altogether new elements from other theories. Thus all irrelevant material in those two metatheories will simply be left out, while other relevant material from outside the metatheories will be introduced to satisfy the needs of this particular study. Although the new theory will be rather a heavily stripped-down, combination version of the sense-making theory and the model of ELIS, let us not forget that these metatheories will nevertheless function as a general frame of reference, hovering somewhere far above my unit theory, as it were.

One last question remains: how is my study empirically related to other studies? Answering the question is fairly easy, because my study literally probes the "twilight zone". First of all, there has been very little scientific research on paranormal phenomena and information on the paranormal in Finland. After conducting extensive literature searches for about a year now, I have so far come up with no more than 27 monographs and articles from the known history of Finland which could be called *scientific* studies on the paranormal. However there is no shortage of research of this kind abroad (Koukku 1995, 2). Secondly I have been unable to find a single study - theoretical or empirical - dealing with the relationship between information seeking and the paranormal. It seems that my

master's thesis was the first one of its kind in the whole wide world.

Seen from the metatheoretical point of view, my study lies on a somewhat firmer basis. The sense-making theory, in spite of its shortages, is by now a widely recognized and applied metatheory. The studies based on this theory are numerous, although it has mainly been used to investigate information needs that arise in work situations. As far as I know, there are only two Finnish sense-making studies which examine information seeking outside work: Kumpulainen's (1993) and Tuominen's (1992). It is notable that both of these are master's theses. The model of everyday life information seeking, being but four years of age, is just starting to arouse interest, it appears. To my knowledge, only Savolainen (1995b; see also Savolainen 1995a), the model's creator, and I (Kari 1996) have applied the model to date.

What Seems to Be the Problem?

The ultimate research problem of my licentiate's dissertation, as some readers may already have gathered, is to discover what kind of needs relating to information on paranormal phenomena people have, why these needs arise, and how these people seek and/or find paranormal information in a particular real-life situation. The task of solving this research problem can be made considerably more manageable by breaking the problem up into smaller chunks. These subproblems can then be presented as a list of ten questions (below). Most of the questions were derived from the sense-making theory and the model of everyday life information seeking. All of the questions, except for the first one, pertain to a particular situation.

- 1) How and why do people become acquainted with information on the paranormal in the first place?
- 2) In what kind of situations is paranormal information needed?
- 3) How do people conceptualize their need for information on the paranormal?
- 4) Why is paranormal information needed in a given situation?
- 5) What qualities are desired of information on the paranormal?
- 6) How is information on paranormal phenomena sought?
* which information sources and providers do people use and why?
- 7) Are there barriers to seeking paranormal information?
- 8) How is paranormal information used in the end?
* is the information beneficial or harmful?

* to what purpose is the acquired information used?

- 9) How does the individual's type of mastery of life (cognitive style) affect seeking information on the paranormal?
- 10) How does the individual's way of life influence seeking paranormal information?

I suspect that there may be too many questions to be answered in the list above. If it turns out that there is just too much material to be analyzed in one study, the scope of the study has to be narrowed by omitting some objectives, starting with questions #9 and #10. The individual's type of mastery of life and his way of life were studied in my master's thesis, so it is not absolutely necessary to bring up these matters again. Actually my licentiate's dissertation comes quite close to my master's thesis by its framing of questions, because these two studies are supposed to complement each other. The purpose of my master's thesis (being a survey) was to chart the general features of needs for and seeking of paranormal information, whereas with the help of my licentiate's dissertation (being qualitative by its nature), I hope to get "beneath the surface" and to discover valid interpretations for the results of my earlier study. If possible, I would also like to be able to contribute to the theoretical pool of our field of study. These higher goals will be compromised, however, if some of the research questions (especially #9 and #10) remain unanswered.

Concepts, Concepts, and Concepts

Here I will define and otherwise explicate all the concepts that are vital for my study. All those concepts which aid me in conceptualizing the research questions must be defined. Otherwise there is a danger that the results of my study will be vague and chaotic, and in the worst case, I would be unable to solve the research problem. Due to my uncertainty concerning the inclusion of questions #9 and #10, I will now only discuss the concepts that are relevant for questions #1 through #8. Besides I am doing my very best to contain this essay within the maximum limit of ten pages. The concepts are presented in a logical order, that is, in the order in which they appear in the list of research questions above. Let us begin with "paranormal phenomenon" and "paranormal information" which are the key concepts underlying the whole study. May I remind you that these concepts are approached not from the angle of a sceptical scientist, but from the angle of the people who invented them.

Paranormal Phenomenon

I suppose the term "paranormal" — also known as "supernatural" — phenomenon is familiar enough to many readers. However, the meaning of the term is perhaps considered as too self-evident nowadays, so there is cause to define it in order to avoid potential misunderstandings. Probably the most typical way to define "paranormal phenomenon" is to regard it as a hypothetical phenomenon¹ which contradicts the scientific laws that are taken for laws of nature — or, more generally — the most fundamental suppositions and principles of science — or, most generally — today's scientific conception of the world (Alcock 1981, 3; Alcock 1991, 151; Björkhem & Johnson 1986, 18; Kurtz 1985, 504), on the one hand, and the expectations of common sense and our everyday experiences (Kivinen 1989, 47; Kurtz 1985, 504), on the other hand.

The proponents of the paranormal maintain that there are dozens if not hundreds of different paranormal phenomena in existence. These various supernatural phenomena have been enumerated and classified at least by Blomqvist (1981, 20-21), Heiskanen (1977, 5), and Kivinen (1989, 55). By far the most researched and legitimate study objects have been the so-called *psi* phenomena. "Psi" means paranormal forces of the psyche or mind (Alcock 1981, 3) — or, more precisely, the unexplicable reception of information or transmission of energy (Bem & Honorton 1994). Psi phenomena are divided into two groups: parapsychical or ESP phenomena (Extra Sensory Perception; supernatural information) and paraphysical or PK phenomena (Psycho-Kinetical phenomena; supernatural activity). Three types of ESP have been distinguished: telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition. PK is usually not subdivided further. (Blomqvist 1981, 20; Eysenck & Sargent 1983, 11; Virtanen 1977, 37).

On the whole, all paranormal phenomena can be sorted into parapsychical (to which ESP belongs) and paraphysical phenomena (which include PK), as Blomqvist (1981, 20-21) does. Parapsychical phenomena principally occur inside the person, in his mind, and depending on him, whereas paraphysical phenomena usually manifest themselves outside the person, and often independently of him. Parapsychical phenomena include receiving information in a supernatural manner and altered states of consciousness. Among paraphysical phenomena are the

¹ "Hypothetical phenomenon" signifies the fact that when talking about supernatural phenomena, it is presumed or claimed that they in fact exist. Therefore the definition for paranormal phenomenon assumes that a phenomenon of this kind may be possible at least **in principle**. The definition does not — nor does it have to — take a position on whether these alleged phenomena really exist or not.

mind's influence upon matter as well as supernatural beings, objects and energies.

Paranormal Information

Now that we know what paranormal phenomena are, defining "paranormal information" is so much easier. Paranormal information is simply information and beliefs about paranormal phenomena. However, the expression "paranormal information" can also be used to refer to information that has supposedly been acquired by supernatural means. I will return to this interesting dichotomy at a later point. It would seem that explicating paranormal information is as easy as that. Wrong. The concept of paranormal information, despite its innocent appearance, is in actual fact an extremely complex one. I will not go into all the welter of detail here, but I do wish to raise a couple of things to demonstrate my point. Let us start from the beginning.

The term "paranormal information" is my own translation of its approximate Finnish equivalent "rajatieto". This "rajatieto" or "paranormal information" is a Finnish concept which was introduced 22 years ago in 1975, when the publisher of *Ultra* (nowadays the leading magazine on the paranormal in Finland) was established (Kuningas 1995a, 3; Kuningas 1995b, 8; Kuningas 1996, 3). During the last three years which I have spent studying and researching paranormal information seeking, I have never encountered the concept in question in foreign literature, at least not in English or Swedish languages. Frankly this state of affairs amazes me. When the paranormal is discussed, it is always referred to by expressions like "paranormal phenomena", "the paranormal", "the supernatural", "the occult", "the New Age" or something to this effect. There is one concept that is related to "paranormal information": it is called "esoteric knowledge". This concept has a much narrower meaning than "paranormal information", however, which thus renders it useless for the purposes of my current study. Because all the related concepts refer to paranormal phenomena themselves or to paranormal belief systems, or have just too narrow a meaning, it is obviously the best choice to use the concept which is most general in its meaning and to the point.

Some of the difficulties in defining "paranormal information" stem from the fact that in Finnish, the word "tieto" stands for two things. It means both "information" and "knowledge". Therefore, the word "rajatieto"² can similarly be interpreted as either a piece of *information*

² *Raja* means "border" or "boundary" in English.

concerning paranormal phenomena or an area of *knowledge* - the sum total of what is known about the paranormal by a particular person or community. In this short paper, I must limit the treatment of "rajatieto" to its aspect of information. By *information* I mean any representation of a part of reality which can be communicated between people (Kari 1996, 16). Taking the knowledge aspect of "rajatieto" along would require the explication of the concept's complicated relationship with "scientific knowledge" and "everyday knowledge", which task I am not willing to undertake here.

Situation

According to *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*, the word "situation" is used "to refer generally to what is happening in a particular place at a particular time" (Collins 1987, 1360). What I understand by "situation" in my study is a position in which a) there is a problem to be solved or a decision to be made concerning the paranormal, but the individual's own knowledge or skills in the field are insufficient, OR b) the individual is just interested in a paranormal subject and wants information on it.

The sense-making theory illustrates the concept of situation through the metaphor of a person walking along a road under certain circumstances. In her master's thesis, Suvi Perttula sets forth rather a feasible typology of situations based on Dervin's and others' work. She divides situations into ten different categories which, however, are not necessarily exclusive of each other:

- 1) *Waiting*. The person waits for some particular thing to happen.
- 2) *Barrier*. The person knows where he wants to go, but someone or something temporarily impedes or slows down his movement on the road.
- 3) *Moving*. The person proceeds along the road towards his destination without any impediment.
- 4) *Decision*. The road branches, and the traveller has to choose one from two or more of these branches that he feels would lead him to his destination.
- 5) *Worry*. The person feels that his progress is not free, for he is under the pressure of surrounding circumstances, which causes fear of the situation getting worse. The person may feel that the road which he has taken will lead to an unknown destination.
- 6) *Orienteering*. The person knows his destination, and there are no barriers visible. Reaching the destination is not completely certain, however, and so the traveller advances by groping his way onwards.

- 7) *Dead end*. The person feels it is impossible to reach his destination. Dead end situations include *wash-out*, in which the road suddenly disappears, and *spin-out*, in which the person cannot see any roads leading away from him.
- 8) *Problematic situation*. The person has to take a road against his own will.
- 9) *Shifting roads*. There are no barriers on the person's way, but he feels that he is unable to reach his destination by this road, so he shifts to another road which he thinks will take him there.
- 10) *Understanding*. The person strives to comprehend a subject more closely. (Perttula 1993, 67-70)

Perttula arranges the situations in a tabular form along two dimensions: 1) does the person anticipate to succeed or fail in reaching his destination? and 2) does the person conceive his movement on the road as free or stationary? (Perttula 1993, 67) Each of these dimensions has three positions, so that a three-by-three table is formed (see Figure 1). In other words, this table can accommodate nine types of situations, which leaves one of the ten categories out. Perttula herself is unable to place her tenth category, *understanding*, in the table. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, in Perttula's opinion, the last situation type considerably differs from all the other types in quality. Secondly, *understanding* can occur in conjunction with other situations, especially when there is a *barrier*. (Perttula 1993, 69-70).

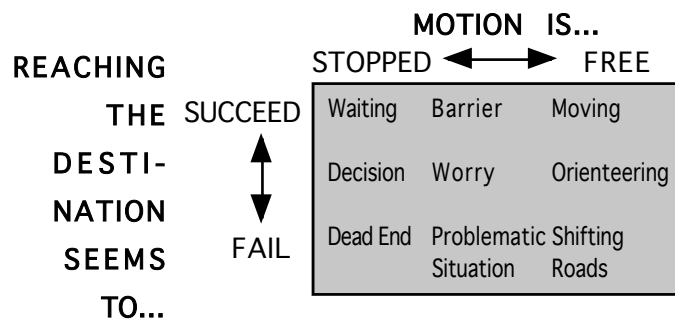


FIGURE 1. A typology of information seeking situations. Source: Perttula 1993, 67.

The question arises, of course, whether *understanding* is a class of situations or not. Because it is obviously divergent from all the other situations, and because it may appear together with almost any other situation, I would not hesitate to say that it is not a situational category at all, but something totally different. *Understanding* could be thought of as more like a motivation for seeking information rather than as a situational type of its own. I will take up this matter later when discussing motivations for information seeking. Getting rid of the category of *understanding* leaves us with a tidy nine-item typology of

situations.

The types of situations above set the basis for understanding the information seeking situation in my study. There is, however, much more to the concept of situation than the mere enumeration of its various categories. I have come up with several aspects of the situation which might affect seeking information in that particular situation. First of all, it can be assumed that when a situation, about which the person has to do something, arises, he usually sets a *goal* for himself - a destination towards which he will struggle in order to clear the situation. Not all goals are of equal importance. Therefore it is not enough to ask what the person's goal is in the situation; it must also be asked how *important* it is for him to achieve this goal. There are still other aspects of the situation which need to be taken into account. The *stressfulness* and *complexity* of the situation, as well as the *urgency of resolving* the situation, as experienced by the person, are all relevant factors when examining the relationship between the situation and information seeking. In addition, the person could also be asked whether the situation in question is related to other situations or whether the situation is a part of a larger complex of situations. And finally, it might be interesting to know if the person has been in a similar situation before, and if so, how often or how many times.

Information Need

Information need may be broadly defined as a person's situation-dependent, more or less definite idea of what information he needs to satisfy a felt more basic need, that is to say, to reach his goal or destination in that situation. Thus, as T.D. Wilson (1981, 8) suggests, information need is not a need in itself, but a need which is subordinate to the person's other needs.

In the sense-making theory, the person's information need is symbolized by a *gap*. The gap is a "moment of discontinuity ... which does not permit the individual, in his or her own perception, to move forward without constructing a new or changed sense" (Dervin 1992, 68). The gap appears in a specific situation. To use the road metaphor again, one might say that the gap is an actual rift in the ground, wide enough to prevent the person from continuing his journey along the road. Of course, he must figure out a way to cross or bridge the gap if he ever desires to attain his objective. In order to be able to construct a bridge across the gap, the person must first determine the essential features of this particular gap, and only then, bearing these in mind, can he conceive what

kind of a bridge he must build and how he can accomplish this. Getting an understanding of the gap and a potential bridge is in fact the emergence of a need for information: what information does the person need to resolve the situation, to carry on with his life?

Information needs have been characterized along a number of dimensions. It goes without saying that usually information is needed on a certain *topic*. In the case of the current study, some examples of topics would be "astrology", "fortune telling", "spirits", "reincarnation" and "UFOs". There are virtually an infinite number of potential topics. All information needs can be classified as either *normal* or *paranormal*, depending on their topic.

Another dimension of "information need" is the *dimension of time*. It should not come to us as a surprise then that information needs can focus on either the past, present or future.

Yet another way to depict an information need is to ask what "aspect of time-space" the need focuses on. Dervin & al. have constructed a typology of information needs according to this criterion. This categorization, which is presented as a set of five questions, is called "5 W focus":

<i>Who</i>	Attempting to identify one or more humans ³ — who they are, what they are like, what they think or feel.
<i>What</i>	Attempting to identify one or more nonhuman entities — objects or situational conditions.
<i>When/where</i>	Attempting to locate one or more entities in time or space.
<i>Why</i>	Attempting to determine the reasons, causes, and explanations of events.
<i>How</i>	Attempting to determine the means or procedures for moving from one point in time-space to another. (Dervin & al. 1982, 430-431)

The *motivations* for seeking information are to be taken seriously as well. I can think of two different levels of motivations. Both of these can be expressed as dichotomies. The first pair of motivations is Patrick Wilson's "interest" vs. "concern". He thinks a person can experience an information need due to one (or both) of two reasons: either he 1) is interested in a given topic and wants to know more about it, or 2) has a problem (about which he is concerned) that needs to be solved one way or another. Both motives may incite the person to seek information. (Wilson 1977, 41-45). Corresponding to these two motives, information needs have more commonly been called "orienting" and "practical" needs, according to whether the

³ Because of the special nature of my study, these also include humanoids (aliens), disembodied spirits and other supernatural beings.

need for information stems from the person's own interests or a problem of his (eg. Järvelin 1987; Savolainen 1995a; Savolainen 1995b). Other expressions for this pair of concepts employed in literature include Krikelas' (1983) "deferred vs. immediate need", Childers' (ibid.) "potential vs. kinetic need", and Wilson's (1995) "non-instrumental vs. instrumental need".

The second pair of motivations for seeking information is *temporal* vs. *spiritual* motives. Temporal "matters involve earthly existence and are limited by time", while spiritual needs relate "to people's deepest thoughts and beliefs, rather than to their bodies and physical surroundings" (Collins 1987, 1405, 1505). This dichotomy may not be relevant to most other studies, but to my study it is. As you can see, these two levels of motives are not totally unrelated to each other: one might imagine that *interests* could have something to do with *spiritual needs*, and that *concerns* and *temporal needs* could very well arise "hand in hand", so to speak.

I still have not exhausted my supply of ways to characterize "information need". All the aspects of this concept listed above refer to the gap which the person faces, to the manner in which he conceptualizes his information need. There is still the bridge to be designed: the person must set some criteria for the information that he wants. There are at least three such groups of criteria which seem pertinent in this context. Firstly, there is the *physical form*: does the person want the information orally, in writing, or otherwise? Or does the physical form matter at all? Secondly, the *relative amount of information* needed is something that the person may consider before engaging in information seeking. Thirdly the person could give emphasis upon some aspects of the wanted information itself or its delivery. I found from the literature altogether ten aspects of information which the person might regard as *criteria for seeking information*. These are:

- 1) Width or holistic nature of information
- 2) Cost of information
- 3) Ease of accessing information
- 4) Applicability of information to the person's situation
- 5) Depth or specialization of information
- 6) Reliability of information
- 7) Newness of information
- 8) Precision of information
- 9) Swiftiness of getting information
- 10) Intelligibility of information. (see for example Chen & Herson 1982, 28, 66; Dervin 1989, 223, 225; Savolainen 1993, 100)

Now the person has a more or less definite idea of what sort of a bridge he needs to construct in order to be capable of crossing the gap.

Information Seeking

After reviewing most of the literature on information seeking at my disposal, I define the concept of "information seeking" as follows: information seeking is a goal-directed process in which a person attempts to find information in information sources to satisfy his needs. To use the gap metaphor, I would say that seeking information corresponds to the person trying to find suitable raw materials for building his bridge. Being "raw", the material has to be treated so that the building blocks will fit both to the edges of the gap and to each other. As soon as the first blocks are ready, the person can start constructing the bridge. Sooner or later, he will have collected, worked and assembled enough bits and pieces so that the bridge finally spans the whole gap. Finding appropriate raw materials is not, however, as easy as that. This is an issue to be discussed next.

Information Source

Defining "information source" is a simple matter, provided that we know what "information" means (which we do). By "information source" I understand any physical carrier of information. In practice, just like there are an infinite number of different information needs, there are also an almost unlimited number of different sources of information. They can — and in fact they must — be classified according to some criteria if one wishes to say anything universal about them. Categorizations of this kind can be devised in many ways. I am going to present five different typologies here, starting with the most familiar classifications and ending with the least familiar ones.

Based on Brown's (1991, 11), Chen & Herson's (1982, 17) and Wilson's (1981, 4) efforts at categorizing information sources, all sources of information fall into one of the following four types: 1) self, 2) other people, 3) organizations and 4) documents. I will give examples of each of these classes of information sources in Table 1 in order to clear up their import.

A more analytic and general method of classifying sources of information is to divide them into formal and informal sources. *Formal* information sources contain information in a permanently recorded form, and *informal* information sources convey information in a non-recorded form, that is, "live". Documents are the only formal information sources in existence; all other sources are

considered to be informal. Informal information sources have also been called "information providers" in the literature. I will use this expression as well, because it is shorter than "informal information sources".

Another dual classification of information sources is to distinguish between *internal* and *external* sources in relation to the person (Huston 1991, 143). Again there is only one type of information sources which is internal to the individual: himself; that is to say, his thoughts, memories and intuitions.

The last two dichotomies have to do with the rather special nature of my study. They are based on the division of phenomena and processes into normal and paranormal. Firstly, from the point of view of the person, all information sources can be said to be either *normal* or *paranormal*. Classifying a specific source of information as "paranormal" is naturally the person's more or less subjective opinion on it. This is not something that the researcher can arbitrate. Table 1 exemplifies what various normal and paranormal information sources, cross-tabulated with the first typology, could be.

TABLE 1. Examples of normal and paranormal types of information sources

Type of source	Normality of source	
	Normal	Paranormal
Self	memory, intuition	precognition, clairvoyance
Other person	friend, neighbour	humanoid, spirit
Organization	library, bank	White Brotherhood, Joint Organ of Planets
Document	book, video film	Akasha Chronicle; a book, written in an alien language, claimed to have been found in a deserted UFO

The second juxtaposition of normal and paranormal concerns the *method of obtaining information* from an information source. *Normal* methods of getting information include, among others, reading and hearing. *Paranormal* methods of receiving information could be, for example, telepathy and altered states of consciousness. As in the previous case, the method of information seeking should be examined as experienced by the individual.

This completes our discussion of the properties of information sources. The next stage in the study process is

to find out what exactly happens when the person encounters a source of information, or, metaphorically speaking, when he finds a spot where he might be able to dig out raw material for his bridge.

In his doctoral dissertation, Michael Nilan (1985, 26) adds two concepts to the sense-making theory which depict the social dimension of the situation in which the person seeking information meets an informal information source, that is, another person or an organization. These concepts are "perceived relative status" and "perceived openness of communication". The *relative status* of the person refers to whether the information seeker feels his status to be higher or lower than that of the information provider, for whatever reason (ibid., 36). The *openness of communication*, in turn, basically means how welcome the person feels to seek advice from the information provider (ibid., 38). These two concepts seem to contribute to the social dimension of my otherwise so individual-centric theoretical framework, so I decided to take them along.

What usually takes place when the person encounters an information provider is the fact that he asks the provider something. This question reflects the person's information need, but is a *negotiated* version of it. In other words, he modifies his information need according to what information or advice he expects to be able to ask and get from the other person.

Before the received information is put to use, the person consciously or unconsciously forms his opinion on the information he got and on the information source from which he got it. First of all, it will be interesting to know to what extent the information satisfies the person's original (not the modified) information need. At this stage, it is also relevant to know just how useful the person considers the information and its source to be, and whether there is something about the information or its source which annoys the information seeker.

One final detail about information sources is the person's *familiarity* with a particular source of information. This can be conceptualized as how many times or how often the person has turned to this same source in the past.

Barrier to Information Seeking

Human life is fraught with problems. A problem may be a reason for seeking information, and even finding or understanding this information can develop into a problem as such. Difficulties in information seeking are called "barriers". A barrier to information seeking can be defined as a perceived factor concerning the individual,

information or information source which hinders or altogether prevents the person from getting or using the information that he needs. In the sense-making imagery this means that while gathering pieces for his bridge, the person runs into trouble of some kind. Perhaps he trespasses on forbidden territory and gets caught, or finds a perfect block of stone but, because of its tremendous size, has no means of carrying it back to the gap of his.

A barrier to information seeking is not to be confused with a barrier situation. A *barrier situation* is an overall context of seeking information in a given situation which may affect many facets of the person's life, whereas a *barrier to information seeking* generally refers to a particular information seeking episode only, and is of direct consequence solely to the person's information seeking activities. It is, of course, possible for these two barriers to occur simultaneously, but it must be kept in mind that in such a case barriers to information seeking are always embedded in a barrier situation.

Barriers to information seeking have been systematically classified at least by Dervin (see Chen & Hernon 1982, 19; Savolainen 1993, 33) and Wilson (1995, 5). Dervin's typology appears more fruitful, so I will employ that here. According to Dervin, there are five distinguishable groups of barriers to information seeking: 1) societal, 2) institutional, 3) physical, 4) psychological and 5) intellectual barriers. *Societal barriers* are barriers which prevent the individual from getting the information due to societal reasons (eg. censorship or war). *Institutional barriers* signify the inability or unwillingness of an organization (or why not of another person) to deliver the wanted information to the individual. *Physical barriers* emerge when the individual fails to get in contact with an information source owing to a physical factor (eg. too long a distance). *Psychological barriers* arise when the individual does not recognize his current needs as requiring information, or when, for one reason or another, he fails to get information from an information source, or, because of psychological causes, he does not accept the possibility that his informational problems can be resolved. *Intellectual barriers* have an influence on the individual if he does not possess enough experience or training to find the desired information. (Chen & Hernon 1982, 19)

Information Seeking Revisited

The portrayal of the information seeking process so far may have given you the impression that the person who seeks information consults no more than one source of information in each situation that gives rise to a need for

information. If this is the idea you have got, you may discard it immediately. It is often the case that the person seeking information cannot obtain all the information pertaining to a certain need of his from a single source of information. Therefore, in order to get all the necessary information, the person may have to turn to another source, and after that, to another, and yet another, until he feels satisfied with his "catch". In the imaginary world of the traveller trying to reach his destination, this equals to the person having to visit more than one location so as to find enough suitable pieces for his bridge. Occasionally, however, it happens that the gap that he has run across is so small that it is easily crossed by placing a single block across it.

If we assume that, when in pursuit of the required information, the person often uses more than one information source, then it is definitely worthwhile to somehow summarize the whole of information seeking process in that particular situation. There are three summarizing concepts that come to my mind. Firstly, it would be interesting to know how much trouble the person takes in finding the needed information. Secondly, it might be inquired how eager the person is to resort to outside help in that situation. Thirdly, it would also be fairly relevant to know how much of his time getting the answers take in the situation.

Information Use

If information seeking is concerned with finding and absorbing information, information use is something which follows this. On the basis of analyzing the conception of "information use" in the literature, I define "information use" as the reconstruction of information for a specific purpose. This reconstruction has an effect on the person's internal and/or external activities, an effect which may be either favourable or unfavourable. It could be said that as an information seeker, the person is in the role of a *receiver* of information, and as an information user, he becomes a *producer* of information.

In the gap metaphor, using information is represented by the traveller constructing the bridge and finally walking across the gap along the bridge. If all goes as planned, he can indeed cross the gap and thus resolve the situation which originally created the gap. This is because the experience of bridging the gap gave the traveller such valuable insight that he finally understands how to resolve the situation. In other words, what formerly seemed to him puzzling about the situation, starts to make

sense⁴. After this, the traveller may proceed to his destination unless his journey is interrupted by another problematic situation, another gap.

A Theory of Paranormal Information Seeking(?)

I have only finished defining the central concepts of my current research project, and I am about to exceed the maximum limit of ten pages which was set for this paper. This cannot be helped for the great number of various concepts that I am using in my study. Explicating all the conceivable relationships between them could easily double the length of this paper, so I will have to settle for something much more modest for now. Perhaps it is enough at this time to display a tentative model of seeking paranormal information. This model (in Figure 2) shows the most important concepts and their subconcepts of my current study, as well as the most important relationships between these, based on the discussion above.

The form and content of the model in Figure 2 is

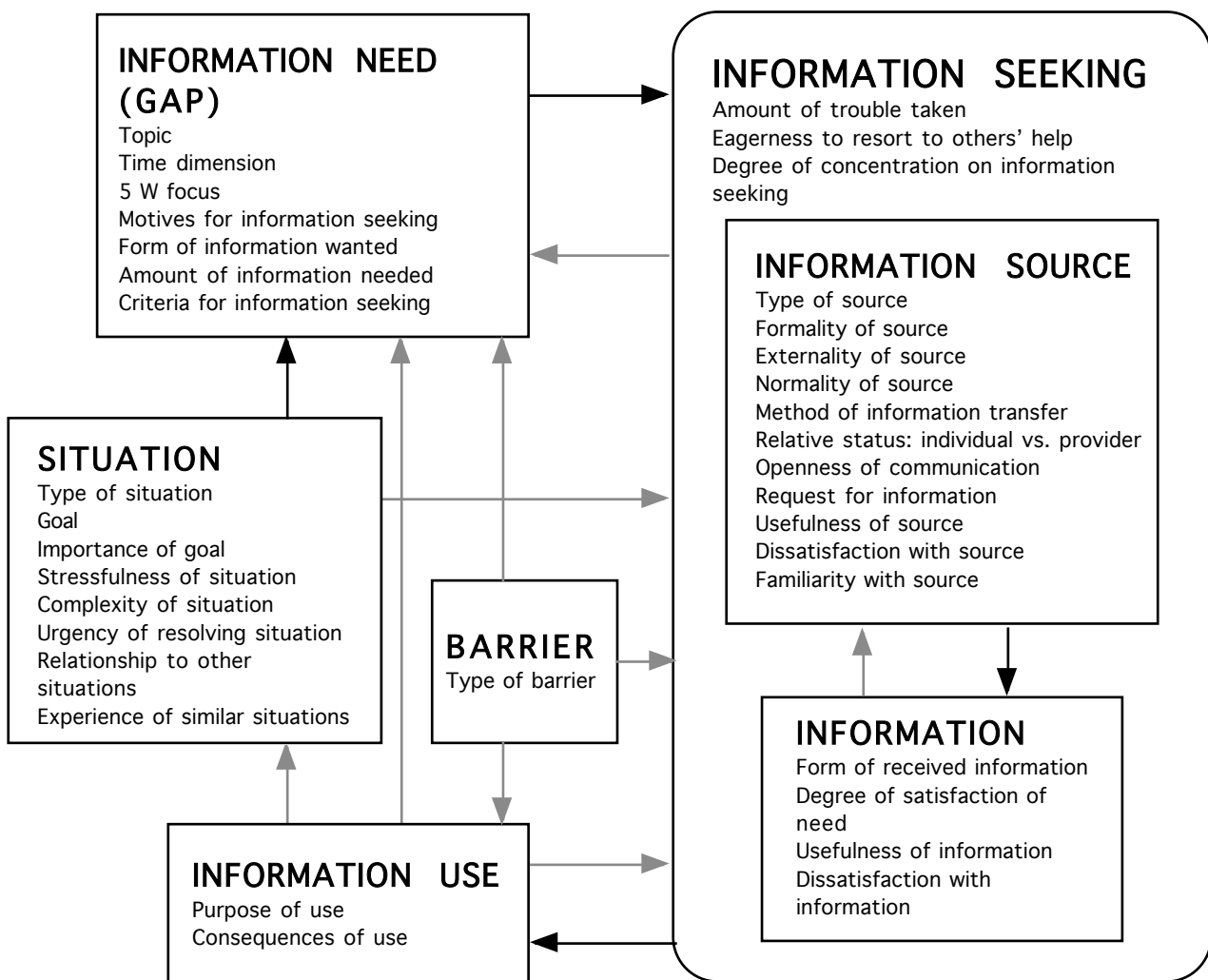


FIGURE 2. A cyclic model of information seeking

⁴ Therefore the expression "sense-making theory".

largely based on Dervin's sense-making triangle of "situation-gap-use" (see for example Dervin 1992, 69) which I have augmented by appending to it the elements of "information seeking" and "barrier". I did this because alone the sense-making triangle is too vague to serve as a unit theory. It needed to be concretized, and the model below is my solution to the problem at hand. The basic structure was influenced by besides the sense-making triangle, also by Tuominen's (1992, 6) model of information needs, seeking and use. The content of the model, that is, the selection of the numerous subconcepts, was partially guided by Savolainen's model of ELIS.

I do not by any means claim that the model which I have constructed here is superior or even equal to other, related models or theories of information seeking. The main purpose of the model is to help me conceptualize and understand my object of study from the viewpoint which I have chosen. Because of its generality, however, the model can, for the most part, be applied to researching not only paranormal information seeking, but many other types of information seeking as well, be it in work or non-

work situations. If the model can help others in their own studies, so much the better.

A brief account of the model is in order. The terms in bold inside the boxes are the principal concepts. Each line of words (in small print) below these represents one subconcept. The boxes, "barrier" not included, can also be thought of as stages of an information seeking process.

The relationships between the primary concepts are depicted by arrows. On the one hand, they determine the direction of influence between two phenomena, and, on the other hand, they also show how the process of information seeking can proceed, from one stage to another. There are two kinds of these arrows: black and grey. A black arrow stands for a typical relationship between two concepts or stages, that is to say, circumstances in which the next stage in the information seeking process follows the previous one in a logical order. The black arrow always points forwards in the process of information seeking process, but only one step at a time. Thus, for example, "information seeking" is a natural consequence of "information need".

A grey arrow illustrates an atypical relationship between concepts. This arrow may point either forwards (usually by more than one stage) or backwards in the information seeking process. There are three varieties of these "grey" relationships.

Firstly, one phenomenon may directly affect another even if there are other, intervening phenomena in between. A good example of this is the effect of "situation" on "information seeking". A relationship of this kind may also signify a skipping of stages in the information seeking process. In the context of the previous example, this would mean that information seeking or discovery may take place in a certain situation even if the person has not realized before that he has a need for information pertaining to that situation.

Secondly, when seeking information, the person can always go back to the stage which immediately preceded the current one, if he so wishes. In other words, if he is not constrained by situational factors or barriers, he can at any time retrace his steps over and over again. An instance of this backtracking would be if the person gets a piece of information from an information source, but is not for some reason satisfied with it, he can go back to its source and perhaps rephrase his question.

Thirdly, there is constantly the possibility of a "barrier" emerging at almost any stage in the information seeking process. A barrier appears for reasons which are chiefly either internal or external to the individual. It is important to comprehend that "barrier" is qualitatively quite different

from all the other concepts in the model in that, unlike the others, "barrier" is not a stage in the process of seeking information. Instead, it is a factor which affects other stages of the process. This is why it is located at the centre of the model, while the other concepts surround it.

The model in Figure 2 is an attempt at representing the process of information seeking as a dynamic, rather than static, chain of events. This is partly reflected by the nature of the relationships between the concepts. But this is not all. Although the typical — one might even say "stereotypical" — presumption is that the process of information seeking starts in a particular "situation", it is not necessarily true. I maintain that this process may in fact begin at any stage in the model. Correspondingly, it is usually assumed that the process of information seeking ends in "information use". This assumption may again prove false. It should be quite acceptable to consider the chance that the person suddenly stops seeking information. This could happen at any stage in the process, too.

Finally, it might be worthwhile to take a look at the model from a bird's perspective, so to speak. As you may be able to discern, I have deliberately endeavoured to present the process of information seeking as a loop or cycle. Traditionally, the process of information seeking has been conceptualized as a linear and rational process with a distinct beginning and end. A more plausible view of information seeking is that it is far from linear and rational. For the want of a better term, it could almost be called "chaotic". Because I am not a pessimist, however, I prefer to call the process of information seeking "cyclic" instead. We may discover that often this process is not a straight line, but a winding line which occasionally takes shortcuts and goes back in cycles of various sizes to an earlier point in the process. After going through all the skipping and backtracking, the person may eventually reach his goal by putting the information that he has found into use. But even this might not be the end of it all. The situation which was resolved or the need that was satisfied could give rise to a new situation, to a new need for information. Thus the end of a cycle of information seeking may be the beginning of a another cycle at the same time. This is one of the basic tenets on which the sense-making triangle of "situation-gap-use" is founded.

Last Remarks

What I have presented above is an effort at explicating the way in which I conceive the object of my study — paranormal information seeking — at the moment. If you

read the first three pages of this paper a second time and compare what I said there with the final result here, you will notice that there is a wide gap between the beginning and the end. I was going to include parts of Savolainen's model of ELIS in my unit theory, but in the end, my theory had grown too large to accommodate major concepts any more. Besides, researching *way of life* and *mastery of life* in addition to the already large body of phenomena under study would be a monumental task to accomplish in one dissertation.

This is the first time in my life that I have actually tried to form a coherent unit theory by myself. Because of my lack of experience, I realize that my unit theory, if it can indeed be called such, is far from perfect: the theory may contain too many concepts and relationships between these; some concepts and relationships may be poorly defined; perhaps some crucial concepts or relationships are missing; some parts of the theory may contradict others; maybe the theory is too mechanistic; perhaps it focuses too much on the individual; etc. Therefore it is only natural that I expect you to "bridge the gaps". You are welcome to share your thoughts and ideas on this paper with me and the others.

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