Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Library and Information Science Research Literature is Chiefly Descriptive and Relies Heavily on Survey and Content Analysis Methods

A Review of:

Aytac, S. & Slutsky, B. (2014). Published librarian research, 2008 through 2012: Analyses and perspectives. *Collaborative Librarianship, 6*(4), 147-159.

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Abstract

Objective – To compare the research articles produced by library and information science (LIS) practitioners, LIS academics, and collaborations between practitioners and academics.

Design – Content analysis.

Setting – English-language LIS literature from 2008 through 2012.

Subjects – Research articles published in 13 library and information science journals.

Methods – Using a purposive sample of 769 articles from selected journals, the authors used content analysis to characterize the mix of authorship models, author status (practitioner, academic, or student), topic, research approach and methods, and data analysis techniques used by LIS practitioners and academics.

Main Results – The authors screened 1,778 articles, 769 (43%) of which were determined to be research articles. Of these, 438 (57%) were written solely by practitioners, 110 (14%) collaboratively by practitioners and academics, 205 (27%) solely by academics, and 16 (2%) by others. The majority of the articles were descriptive (74%) and gathered quantitative data (69%). The range of topics was more varied; the most popular topics were libraries and librarianship (19%), library users/information seeking (13%), medical information/research (13%), and reference services (12%). Pearson's chi-squared tests

detected significant differences in research and statistical approaches by authorship groups.

Conclusion – Further examination of practitioner research is a worthwhile effort as is establishing new funding to support practitioner and academic collaborations. The use of purposive sampling limits the generalizability of the results, particularly to international and non-English LIS literature. Future studies could explore motivators for practitioner-academic collaborations as well as the skills necessary for successful collaboration. Additional support for practitioner research could include mentorship for early career librarians to facilitate more rapid maturation of collaborative research skills and increase the methodological quality of published research.

Commentary

Librarianship includes practitioners serving a range of clients in widely different settings. As such, librarianship includes individuals with diverse backgrounds, expertise, and research interests. The goal of this study was to characterize the portion of LIS literature describing the research conducted by practitioners and academics engaged in research. The results confirm some common knowledge about LIS research; namely, that librarians rely heavily on surveys and relatively simple statistical techniques. It also provides new insights about the possible differences in the types of research conducted by practitioners and academics.

Unfortunately, the validity of the results remains unclear due to the study's incomplete reporting of the rationale and method for coding the research articles (Glynn, 2006). Two issues are of primary concern. First is the lack of information provided about the inclusion criteria for the sample of research articles. It is difficult to understand how the results relate to the broader body of LIS research literature without knowing how the authors defined and bounded their research. The second issue is the use of a journal sample that may not equally

represent all librarians, specifically corporate, special, and school librarians. The authors do not provide selection criteria or address this limitation. Although the authors claim the results are representative of practitioner-researchers, purposive sampling does not support this generalization.

Determining face validity of the categories used for analysis of authorship, topics, research methods, and research techniques requires more information than is provided. The article would benefit from further details about category descriptions and the process for developing and assigning these codes. In particular, collapsing authorship into single author and collaborative authorship groups may hide possible differences between co-authorship and larger collaborative research partnerships. Another concern regarding authorship roles arises from the use of author affiliation and title as proxies for classifying authors into practitioners, academics, students, or other. Finally, the study excludes collaborations between librarians and academics beyond those in LIS.

The disconnect between the introduction, results, and conclusion makes it difficult for the reader to identify implications for practice. The authors do not clearly relate the results to the literature cited (e.g., Watson-Boone, 2000), nor do they provide meaningful conclusions about the utility of the results for library practice or future practitioner research.

Future research in this area could identify professional trends in collaborative research and the use of specific research methods and statistical techniques. Such studies should carefully consider choices about defining authorship models and use standard definitions for research approaches, methods, and statistical techniques. Extrapolating librarian professional development needs from this limited sample of journals excludes librarian research published in interdisciplinary and topical journals. Any future studies should include a wider sample of journals or use a stratified sample of practicing librarians and LIS researchers from a range of settings.

References

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Watson-Boone, R. (2000). Academic librarians as practitioner-researchers. *Journal of Academic Librarianship, 26*(2), 85-93. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0099-1333(99)00144-5