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LIS and Social Work: Intersecting Pasts, A Shared Future (Panel)

Abstract or Résumé:

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, the synergy and collaboration between LIS (Library and Information Science) and social work (SW) has become more pronounced in higher education and professional settings on both sides of the border. In Canada, we see more public libraries (PLs) hiring social workers, with Edmonton PL as one of the first to participate in this movement (Edmonton PL, 2022); now, social workers are on staff in many public libraries, including such large library systems as Toronto PL (Hepburn, 2018). Dual degrees in LIS/SW are now offered in some North American universities (e.g., Dominican U, U of Michigan); iSchools began to hire faculty specializing in data for social justice; and research collaborations on using ICTs, AI, social media, and robotics for therapeutic and community interventions have become commonplace. In general, there is a recognition that SW approaches to working with people in crisis, homeless populations, immigrant communities, and individuals living with chronic illness and addictions are necessary for frontline library staff as well, especially, in PLs (e.g., Rice & Tambe, 2017; Westbrook, 2009, 2015). The holistic person-in-environment approach and the strength and empowerment perspectives—the cornerstones of SW—have also proven influential in reshaping LIS professional thinking (Bertot et al., 2015; Segal et al., 2013). In addition to PLs, academic librarians also discuss the merit of the SW mindset for educating effective researchers, teaching information literacy, and fostering organizational efficiency (Enomoto, 2015). In turn, social workers have acknowledged the crucial role of information and technology in providing equitable and timely service and improving the quality and reach of care. They have also begun seeing libraries as potential collaborators in community engagement and intervention (Soska & Navarro, 2020).

LIS and SW share intersecting histories. In the early 20th century, both professions were under scrutiny for being female-dominated vocations and ostensibly having no scientific base; it was questioned whether both – librarianship and social work – were or could ever be fully fledged professions at all (e.g., Flexner, 1915; Kuhlman, 1938). It took decades for both fields to refine their distinct professional identities and develop the body of professional knowledge and literature of their own, becoming not only professions but also academic disciplines. The American Library Association still accredits LIS programs in Canada. Prior to 1973, it was also the case with SW programs in Canada, whose accreditation relied on the American Council of Social Work Education (CSWE); however, in 1973, the National Committee of Schools of Social Work in Canada took over, and now SW programs are accredited by the Canadian Association for Social Work Education.

Acknowledging the intersecting pasts, recognizing the increasingly collaborative present, and contemplating opportunities ahead, this panel presents several projects and experiences from Canada and the U.S. by the researchers from both disciplines. The panel sets out to create a space for informed dialogue and knowledge sharing, moving us towards a collaborative interdisciplinary future that aligns SW and LIS scholarship, expertise, and practice. It will highlight challenges and opportunities associated with the synergy between SW and LIS in various types of libraries and in higher education. It will address the evergreen tension of theory vs. practice and review the similarities and differences in how it plays out in both fields. Finally, the panel will also be situated in the context of discussions on DEIA, social justice, pandemic effects, and health and well-being.

The following select aspects will be addressed:

Past:

- Historical antecedents of interdisciplinary collaboration between LIS and SW and an overview of the current state of interdisciplinarity. The theory-practice tension in LIS and social work. (Keren Dali)

Present

- Different models of employment of social workers in public libraries in Canada (Angelica Esposito and Kaitlin Wynia Baluk)
- Preparing public librarians for developing community-based social services and conducting community-based research (data collection, research readiness, learning about one another—library staff and social workers, etc.) (Noah Lenstra)
- Conducting community-based health and wellness research with public libraries and supervising SW students completing field placements in public libraries (Charles Senteio)

Future

- Toward a healthier academic community: social workers and academic librarians working together (mental health; post-COVID; anti-bullying; bibliotherapy) (Keren Dali)

2. Virtual Panel Structure

The 90 min of the panel will be organized as follows:

1. An introduction of panelists and the panel logistics (5 min).

2. Introductory lightning talks: panelists will take turns to briefly introduce their topics and set the stage for discussion and interactive small-group (breakout room) activities (35 min)
3. Small-group (breakout room) activities: Workshop-style activities facilitated by the panelists whereby participants will be able to critically discuss select issues on the intersection of LIS and SW, learn more about SW, and collaboratively work toward solutions. (30 min).
4. Culminating general discussion: Participants and facilitators will return to the general room to share the outcomes of small group discussions and take stock of the learning that occurred in the session. (20 min)

Intended outcomes of the panel for conference participants:

1. Improved knowledge of current SW contributions to LIS practice, education, and research
2. Improved familiarity with challenges and opportunities facing both fields
3. Improved understanding of the future collaborative potential between both fields

3. Panel Participants

The panelists include three LIS faculty, a SW student, and a post-doctoral fellow from Canada and the U.S. who work on the intersections of both disciplines.

Keren Dali, Ph.D., holds degrees in both SW and LIS, as well as certificates in Diversity & Inclusion and Project Management; much of her work is situated on the intersection of both disciplines and examines the cross-pollination between SW and LIS in graduate education, the concept of a blended professional, the role of technology education in SW, and the application of SW in academic libraries.

Charles Senteio has a Ph.D. in Information Science with a concentration in health informatics from the University of Michigan iSchool; he also holds an MSW and an MBA from the University of Michigan and is a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW); Charles has certifications relevant to applied research in community health informatics (CHES – Certified Health Education Specialist, CHW-I – Community Health Worker Instructor).

Noah Lenstra has a Ph.D. in LIS from the University of Illinois. He currently works with the SW Program at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, to coordinate the placement of SW students at local libraries and has also been researching the proliferation of SW partnerships in collaboration with the South Carolina Center for Rural and Primary Healthcare.

Kaitlin Wynia Baluk has a Ph.D in Health and Society from McMaster University. She has recently started a postdoctoral fellowship in McMaster's DeGroote School of Business – Information Systems, where she will investigate the digital literacy needs, experiences, and training preferences of older adults living in affordable housing. Kaitlin previously worked as a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Health, Aging, and Society at McMaster and a researcher-in-residence at Hamilton Public Library, where she helped to facilitate interdisciplinary and inter-organizational research partnerships.

Angelica Esposito has an MA in Sociology from La Sapienza University of Rome. She recently completed the Undergraduate Social Work program at McMaster University where she was an intern with the Community Research Platform. She is due to start the MSW Critical Analysis at McMaster for which she has also been awarded a National scholarship. In 2022, Angelica assumed the role of Local Ambassador for the Ontario Association of Social Workers. Also, she is a volunteer with the Hamilton Community Legal Clinic and has sat on the 2021-2022 McMaster Field Instruction Committee as a student representative.

Angelica Esposito and Kaitlin Wynia Baluk were part of a Community Research Platform at McMaster University, which aims to support the sharing of infrastructure between organizations to support research partnerships. To support the Hamilton Public Library's exploration of ways to integrate social work practice into its operations, Angelica conducted a literature review on social work practice in libraries and an environmental scan of Canadian public libraries hosting social workers and social work students, which she shared with the library and with McMaster's School of Social Work through a presentation. Kaitlin helps to facilitate sharing of knowledge among institutions in Hamilton, primarily between Hamilton Public Library and McMaster University. Current research projects include an evaluation of a free transit pilot program for children, a study on public libraries and food security, and an investigation of the emotional labor of public library work, a topic that is being broadly discussed in Canada (see Beattie, 2021). Kaitlin is currently creating a toolkit that will help public library workers navigate and form mutually beneficial and interdisciplinary research partnerships with universities.

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