

Re-Imaging Public Librarianship Education: And No, Not for Social Work

Siobhan Stevenson

University of Toronto, CA

siobhan.stevenson@utoronto.ca

ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates the importance of historicizing seemingly novel phenomenon as a means of defamiliarizing what is presented as obvious and inevitable. Thus, the popular constitution of the library as community hub and the placement of social workers therein is problematized when read against a parallel history involving the introduction, in the 1960s, of social workers into the library to assist in the delivery of community Information and Referral services (I&R). Starting from the question, *if social workers are the solution, what is the problem their employment in public libraries is meant to solve*, a literature search of social work and library science databases was conducted followed by a textual analysis of the research revealing competing narratives about professional competencies and legitimacy. The analysis surfaced critical questions regarding the current state of public librarianship and why a return to the reference desk might be a good idea.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Public libraries; Information needs; Reference transactions; Specific populations. Education

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Public libraries, Community hubs, Social workers, Psycho-social information needs, Public librarianship, Professional boundaries

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INTRODUCTION

The widely heralded transformation of the public library into a community hub is more than a rebranding exercise, it ushers in a different kind of informational orientation and mandate, from one grounded in education and instruction (formal, informal, life-long, recreational) to one more attuned to social service delivery and a flexible space.

There is no question that providing the means to access needed social services has become essential work in support of an ever-expanding population of the poor and unhoused including individuals suffering from addiction and mental health issues. In this context, the public library *is the* social safety net. Yet this transformed library requires a corresponding shift in the kinds of people and skills a community hub needs to function effectively, and it is here where the sands of time are shifting under the feet of the professional librarian. Since 2009, the year the San Francisco Public Library hired its first social worker (Shepherd et al. 2023), more libraries are hiring or contracting with professional social workers and/or providing internships to social work students. Additionally, frontline staff are now regularly trained in social work practices and techniques (e.g., crisis de-escalation, sensitivity training, person-centered approaches, Naloxone training, soft hand offs, etc.), and some library schools are offering dual degrees in library science and social work, such as Dominican University, and University of Michigan (Dali et al. 2022, 1). The rationale, as per Dominican University's website is "[s]ocial work and librarianship are converging, as mission-driven professionals in both fields work together to connect people with resources and services. Train for this vital role in our unique online MLIS/MSW dual degree" (Dominican University, n.d.)

Although the convergence of these two fields within the public library space is characterized as an innovative response to contemporary conditions (Luo et al 2012; Moxley and Abbas 2016), this is not the first time that librarians and social workers have found themselves sharing space in the public library, nor when specialized degrees with similar aims were introduced (Estabrook 1979, 156). I refer here to the public library's brief expansion into community Information and Referral services (I&R) dating from the mid-1960s through the early 1980s.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the value of historicizing seemingly novel phenomenon to gain fresh insights and generate new questions of relevance for the field. Failure to do so may have serious consequences, this especially when much of the current research about public library social work is produced by social work scholars and practitioners who posit an image of the librarian and library staff as lacking the capacities to work effectively with individuals presenting with complex psychosocial needs.

The Data

The method of data collection was an integrated literature review (Toracco 2016) of databases associated with the fields of social work (*Applied Social Sciences Abstracts*, *Social Service Abstracts*, and *Social Work Abstracts*), and library and information science (*Wilson's Library Literature* and *LISTA*), using the keyword string: "social worker*" and "public librar*".

No restrictions were placed on material type (news items, editorials, theses, monographs, feature articles, academic papers and research, etc.) or date of publication. This review built upon and complemented two previous literature reviews on the topic (Lee et al. 2022; Shepherd et al. 2023). However, where those reviews were interested in questions concerning how, to what ends, and to what extent social work is being practiced in libraries, this review took a step back to ask, *if social workers are the solution, what is the problem their employment in public libraries is meant to ameliorate/solve?* To that end, a discourse analysis of captured texts was conducted, paying specific attention to the ways library workers, library users, and social workers were characterized, as well as descriptions of their working relationships such that social workers and/or social work practices are deemed necessary for the public library's effective functioning (Stevenson 2025).

Interesting findings include the various problem definitions for which social workers were the solution, and the level of agreement between research papers depending on the author's identification as either a social work or library and information science scholar and/or practitioner. Notably, for researchers associated with the field of social work, the problem that the employment of social workers was meant to solve, was a gap in library staff competencies and/or staff's ambivalence towards working with vulnerable patrons (e.g., Cart 1992; Morgan et al. 2016; Provence 2020; Giesler 2021, 411). Conversely, when authors were from LIS, they tended towards a more nuanced analysis of the problems libraries are facing with respect to complex patron needs, and a more measured if not critical perspective on the trend towards public library social work is provided (e.g., Crabtree et al. 2024; Baum et al. 2023; Gross and Latham 2021; Cathcart 2008).

The remainder of this paper reviews the historical materials produced by LIS scholars against the research produced by contemporary social work scholars. This is followed by a summary of the contemporary library literature research on the topic (much smaller in number), culminating in a reflection on any new insights and questions of relevance to LIS educators and researchers.

COMMUNITY I&R SERVICES, SOCIAL WORKERS, LIBRARIANS AND VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

While a detailed account of the history of I&R services in libraries is beyond the scope of this paper, the work of Mairead Browne (1976), Leigh Estabrook (1979), and Risha W. Levinson (1988) hold up a powerful mirror through which to reflect critically upon the issues associated with the introduction of today's social workers. Collectively, these three authors paint a picture of a time, a place, an occupation, and an organization's expansion into a pre-existing area of public service; one that involved a different kind of information (about community and social services), in service to a different kind of clientele (disadvantaged, non-library users), and demanding a different kind of information intervention. This expansion was further complicated

by the introduction into the library of a second professional identity (social workers) with experience in I&R for the purpose of supporting the public library's work in this area.

It is an interesting exercise to compare the current discourse surrounding the introduction of social workers into public libraries in this millennium against that of the public library's expansion in the 1960s into I&R services, and the hiring of social workers in service to non-traditional users. Despite the passage of over sixty years, the similarities are notable (the library working to become more community focused and to extend its reach beyond a minority of middle-class educated users, as well as the ensuing role confusion and boundary disputes between the two professions). There are however important discursive differences. Then, there was no mention of staff and patron safety, homelessness, or the impact of technology on the library's traditional functions like reference. Most notable is the reality that in the 1960s and early 1970s, the larger policy problem was the complexity and size of the welfare state bureaucracy and not the human fallout associated with its erosion and the pressures on today's public library to become one refuge for its casualties.

Of interest here, however, are the differing discursive treatments of librarianship on the one hand, and social work on the other, as two separate and distinct professional classes. In the work of Browne (1976), Estabrook (1979), and Levinson (1988), both occupations are attributed—in equal measure—with agency, expertise, and authority over a unique jurisdictional knowledge base. The assumption is that both professions contribute—in equal measure—and consistent with their expertise, service to a larger social problem: connecting vulnerable individuals to the social services they require. For example, in discussions of the strengths of each profession, social workers are acknowledged as possessing the counseling and interpersonal communication skills necessary for face-to-face work, and librarians are unambiguously attributed with the information skills essential for the curation, organization, maintenance, and dissemination of that information. Levinson (1988) summarized her observations of an interdisciplinary team approach to I&R thus: “Social workers and librarians tend to approach I & R from different philosophical and ideological frames of references” [where] “librarians tend to focus on informational aspects of I&R and are uneasy with counseling and advocacy components [and] social workers are less inclined towards involvement with service classifications and standardized information systems, but engage more directly in counseling, follow-up and advocacy” (131).

For Levinson, writing 10 years after Browne's “Librarians, Social Workers - and Community Information: The Territorial Stake-Out” (1976), there is no territorial stakeout, “as social workers have become more appreciative of the information-technical skills of the librarian in compiling resource files and maximizing retrieval capabilities, the librarian has also gained greater acceptance of the role of the ‘human service intermediary’” (Levinson 1988, 132). Today, role confusion is an important topic of discussion on both sides, what is less clear is the nature of the expert work performed by the librarian on balance with that of the social worker. Consider the following comment from a librarian as captured in a survey conducted by Giesler in 2021, “Kim, an adult services librarian at site 1, shared how the library social worker at her facility provided her with a food pantry list and a Muslim prayer schedule that she, in turn, handed to patrons” (409). Given the information agency attributed to social workers, where does the professional librarian's expertise reside if not within that context?

Two key takeaways from this comparative analysis of the two periods. First, in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, the librarian exercises complete agency over the organization, and the social worker operates within the context of one specific program, community I&R services. Within today's context, the relative influence of one profession over the other is more ambitious. Consider the following statement produced by library scholars, "while the original vision of hiring library social workers may have been to refer patrons to social service agencies or assist patrons in crisis, this has evolved and shifted to a holistic approach that *impacts the entire library*" (Finch and Real 2023, 325).

The second takeaway: when librarians and library staff are presented from a deficit perspective, the following research finding appears as a commonsense response to contemporary challenges:

[staff] identified the clear benefit, due to their time constraints and scope of knowledge, that having a social worker on site would be to the patrons' advantage. In their understanding, a social worker's training gives them expertise both with people in need and knowledge of human service organizations that provides community support (Kelly et al. 2017, 119).

NEW INSIGHTS. QUESTIONS OF RELEVANCE

In its reincarnation as a community hub combined with the ambiguous role currently occupied by the professional librarian, the institution runs the risk of being overtaken by cognate professions (social workers, public health nurses) whose own sites of public service have been diminished or displaced by e-government, and who may come to see the library as a new place of employment, and professional practice. Melvin Delgado's (1999) oft cited definition of "non-traditional" sites of social work practice is regularly evoked as a source of legitimation for the integration of social workers into public libraries. As described by Aykanian et al. (2020) "drawing on Delgado's (1999) framework, libraries are ideal nontraditional urban settings for social work practice because they are socially embedded in the community, often serve as urban sanctuaries, remain a free space, contain a high degree of social and natural support systems, and are safe spaces to find answers and acquire resources" (S72). Ideal or not, who should decide what the future of the public library is including what services it will offer, by whom and in aid of what social project?

Complicating the issue further is the elimination of the librarian from the frontlines of service. This once may have been justified by the displacement of those analog reference materials that demanded a rigorous and professional, if esoteric, knowledge to access by Google, but given that the work of social workers tends to focus on frontline information provision, one wonders why a librarian can't do that work? Why aren't they doing that work?

Conversely, when the jurisdictional knowledge of librarians is presented through an LIS lens, the argument in favor of hiring social workers is challenged. This is evident in the critical questions posed by LIS scholars currently conducting research in this area (Crabtree et al. 2024;

Baum et al. 2023), but also earlier work that exists separate from this topic, and that provides convincing accounts of the theoretical history of, and methods applied to the connection between information and human need. Durrance and Fisher's (2003) paper, "How Libraries and Librarians Help" is a case in point. So compelling is their discussion that one cannot help asking, why has there been a disconnect between information behaviour research and professional public library practice? Surely, if librarians were armed with the theories and insights generated by this research, they would be well equipped to appreciate the struggles of individuals with complex psychosocial needs and to connect them to needed resources?

Similarly, Westbrook's (2003) paper "I Am Not a Social Worker" is an endorsement of the actual and potential capacity of the reference librarian to work with the full range of human conditions (Baum et al. 2023, 400). Westbrook also inspires a question of relevance to this discussion: do public librarians still operate within that unique domain of information expertise—the reference desk—such that their practice would benefit from Westbrook's approach?

Ultimately failure to re-contextualize public librarianship within an information context now that the value of reference work has been relatively deskilled, creates the perfect conditions for the introduction of other professionals to engage in information service work. Again, as reflected by one pair of social work scholars, "from our assessment of the library and social work fields, librarians are recognizing the limitations of their professional role in social service information and provision...and therefore [are] hiring social workers" (Soska and Navarro 2020).

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to demonstrate the importance of historicizing seemingly novel phenomenon as a means of defamiliarizing what is often presented as obvious and inevitable. In this way the increasingly common constitution of the public library as a community hub and the placement of social workers in that space is problematized when read against a similar historical moment, the introduction of community I&R services and social workers into the library. From a discourse analysis perspective, the differing treatment of the topic is clearly linked to the researchers' affiliation with either social work or librarianship. While this paper was concerned with the introduction of social workers into the library space as a jurisdictional issue, it surfaced a range of critical questions regarding the current state of professional public librarianship that need attending to today if we are to do right by the next generations of professionals, their communities, and the evolution of the institution.

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