

Research Proposal Component #2

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Philosophical approach

Creswell and Creswell (2018) published an article in which they describe four philosophical worldviews: post-positivism, constructivism, transformative, and pragmatism. They wrote that these worldviews “influence the practice of research and need to be identified” (p. 5). These worldviews (also referred to as research paradigms) influence researchers in the way they perceive what is happening within the study and the world around them. The worldviews through which our proposed study will be conducted are two-fold. We will apply both constructivist and transformative worldviews.

Constructivism seeks to understand the experiences of participants within a study. This will be the lens through which the study is conducted. We seek to better understand the perceptions of social work being done within public libraries within groups that have not yet had an opportunity to share their experiences or beliefs. Constructivist research focuses on participant feedback through open-ended questioning and subjective feedback. Constructivism also explores the history and experiences that have led to held beliefs and perceptions. Similarly, we will inquire about the experiences our participants have had that have led to their perceptions of social work within public libraries.

The transformative worldview is the lens through which we will set our goals for our study. This worldview seeks to “confront social oppression” and is “intertwined with politics and a political change agenda” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 9) and takes the concepts of constructivism further. With both social work and public libraries falling within the public sphere, the transformative worldview is one that we must also keep in mind throughout our

study. Research under this paradigm focuses on groups within society that may be disenfranchised or under-represented.

We seek to allow an opportunity for individuals within some of these groups to voice their opinions and experiences, as many patrons who utilize social programs within public libraries may identify with one or more marginalized groups within society. Like the transformative worldview, we seek to focus on the experiences and perceptions of groups that have been marginalized, such as patrons experiencing homelessness, immigrant families, etc. “Transformative research uses a program theory of beliefs about how a program works and why the problems of oppression, domination, and power relationships exist” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 10). Similarly, we will explore how social work programs work and what dynamics or issues may exist within the current structures.

Literature Review

In recent years, many libraries have started to hire social workers in order to provide assistance to those in the community who need more specialized help. Although social workers have not been working in libraries until recently, the idea of a crossover between the two careers is not new. Public libraries have long been considered makeshift shelters and excellent community resources, requiring librarians to fall back on skills that might be more well suited to people with degrees in social work. As the idea of including social workers in library spaces has caught on, many case studies have been conducted to determine whether or not it is helpful to have social workers in public libraries.

Provence (2020) wrote about a case study in which the exact role of social workers in library settings was reviewed. Through interviews and surveys, it was discovered that many social workers employed by public libraries felt that they were helping humanize library patrons

experiencing homelessness. This was accomplished through not only their own interactions with patrons but also the time they spent training other staff members to help in similar situations. This was a very valuable finding, as many libraries do not have the budget or resources to hire social workers but can still find value in the practices they employ.

Many other studies confirm that librarians would benefit from either having a social worker onsite or undergoing training that would help them handle certain scenarios in a more effective way. A study conducted by Anderson et. al (2012) found that library staff often find themselves in a position to help patrons with more extreme needs, but they lack the training required to properly provide assistance. Furthermore, as the increase in demand for social services increases, so does the stress felt by public library staff. In the article *Beyond Books: Public Libraries As Partners For Population Health*, it is noted that “being of service to highly vulnerable people, however, can be a stressor, and library staff lament that they ‘sometimes become a default social worker.’ Staff requested further training on social issues and how to better answer questions and deal with the public.” (Morgan et al., 2016, p. 4).

Lloyd (2020) emphasizes the fact that libraries across the country all have unique communities and serve different needs, which can make it difficult to determine the efficacy of social workers across the board. Despite this, there are many aspects of social work that are relatively universal. Lloyd describes the main role of a social worker in a library as someone who “establishes relationships with patrons experiencing problems whose solutions lie outside the library”. This means helping patrons who have more social service-related needs, although the ability to help is often limited by the lack of local resources to refer people to. Because of this, the role of a social worker can vary greatly depending on the library location and surrounding community.

Moxley and Abbas (2016) envision the library as community anchors for at-risk and vulnerable populations. Libraries were structured as fortresses in the ancient and even mediaeval worlds in which caretakers protected sacred forms of knowledge. It was the modern library that opened its collections to the public. Recognizing the information or literacy needs of citizens in societies undergoing considerable social change, libraries in Britain and the U.S. expanded as a means of accommodating a growing literacy among people, the rise of public education, including primary, secondary and higher forms, and the expansion of commerce, itself demanding new institutions supporting the diffusion of information and knowledge. Many libraries make computers and internet access available to their patrons, increasing the information value they achieve for common citizens. Public librarians serve important roles in helping people not only access information but also to evaluate and interpret it for their own uses.

In the article *Library Systems Embracing Their New Roles as Social Service Hubs* (Nonko, 2019), the phrase “protective factor” is highlighted – a common term in social work circles that means “a place or a thing where we’re helping to support people, and not change things negatively for them” (p.3). Many social workers shared that a commonly identified protective factor indicated by their clients is a public library. Due to the nature of libraries being community spaces of inclusion and antidiscrimination, folks accessing social services and support from social workers often collaborate at public library spaces whenever possible. In order to eliminate barriers to information and service access, the natural next step is to provide these necessary resources by a trained professional social worker in the space where their clients often already are and feel comfortable meeting at.

As populations of vulnerable people become more visible in communities, libraries are recognizing their responsibility to provide more than just a ‘place to sleep’ (Kelleher, 2013).

Librarians are seeking to understand the societal context in which vulnerable individuals live and their unique information and service needs flowing from their social situations so libraries and librarians can help people obtain resources that improve their well-being (Hersberger 2005; Westbrook and Gonzalez 2011). In the U.S. the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) offers a specific rationale for the library as anchor by emphasizing vital contributions local institutions make to advance the quality of life of whole communities, particularly during periods of social change (Taylor et al. 2012).

The authors' exploratory research in the U.S. reveals the diversity of collaborative efforts among libraries and human service programs, both public and nonprofit ones. Public libraries may be picking up the slack of failing human service systems, ones that have collapsed or have been vitiated in the retrenchment of public investment in human services. There is ample evidence that many human service systems are inadequate, leaving people who face considerable problems of daily living to fend for themselves (Bloom and Farragher 2010). The collaboration among public librarians and social and human service providers, that unfolds within library settings, expands possibilities for advancing social inclusion within communities in which there are many needs. If, as the IMLS indicates, the local public library is a place of safety in which people can fulfil their information, education, cultural and social needs, there is the possibility that the library itself can become an anchor for advancing the well-being of particular groups whose members are struggling with the causes and consequences of serious social issues.

Libraries can function as enriched day centers for homeless people, offering opportunities for homeless people to spend the day unnoticed by other citizens, legitimating their presence in prime rather than marginal space (Hodgetts et al, 2008). Library access is also associated with the cultivation of social capital (Goulding 2004); They provide opportunities for fostering

relations between diverse community members, civic participation and engagement (Alstad and Curry 2007). As Goulding notes:

“The recent interest in public space as a key neighborhood and community resource is partly the result of the perception that we live in an increasingly divided society where public facilities are no longer automatically accessible...Public space where people from all walks of life can meet and interact is arguably more important than ever, therefore, for social exchange and the strengthening of community bonds and thus, the building of social capital, but it is clearly under siege in many places.”

Taking a look at the impact of social workers from a different perspective, we can examine the article *Social workers within Canadian public libraries: A multicase study* (Schweizer, 2018). In this case study, researchers utilized cross-case analysis to identify common challenges that social workers face within their own profession, and then applied those challenges within public library settings. One of the main challenges identified by social workers is capacity as it relates not only to workload but also to managing staff and client relationships. With public libraries hiring only one or two social workers at best, this challenge magnifies due to the complexity of work and the multi-faceted level of service they provide their clients. Branching off of this first challenge was the mention of starting up social work-centered programs, initiatives, outreach, etc. when joining a public library as a social worker. This further dilutes the amount of time a social worker can commit to direct client-based work (Schweizer, 2018, p.169).

Another challenge that stems from public perception is the idea that having social workers permanently join public library staff will lead to an increase in folks coming to the library for social services. Though this is indeed the point – we want folks to have easier access

to social service resources by way of a social worker in the library – this perception is more commonly held by library patrons that generally do not have a reason or need to access these resources. To put it plainly – there is a belief that this addition of social workers will “decrease safety and increase the number of ‘unwanted’ individuals, thereby creating a negative environment” (p. 160). Combating this misguided perception has been a struggle for social workers and their clients alike, and oftentimes is one of the common reasons why funding for such projects – particularly within the unionized workplace – often does not come through (Schweizer, 2018).

The last challenge mentioned in this article relates to difficulties regarding evaluation and general social work barriers unrelated to the location where the social worker resides for work, such as resource funding and burnout. To expand a bit on evaluation – this proves to be particularly tricky due to a large percentage of a social worker’s clientele not having permanent housing, and therefore may be more likely to move areas more frequently, on average. Gathering long-term evaluations from their clients is not impossible, but it certainly does have more barriers. This probable lack of long-term evaluation does not serve to support funding or other resource attainment for social workers looking to work within public libraries, especially in areas where the library communities are already weary of what changes having social workers in the library will result in.

Public libraries have been identified by patrons as safe community spaces, rather than as simply formal, isolating, and cold environments for information exchange. The significance of the library as a place to go can be considered in the context of other places, such as a park, school, or emergency housing shelter. In terms of daily routine, a shelter closes in the early morning hours and the trip to the library is a stabilizing event central to many patrons’ daily schedules. The library provides a place where people have the right to spend the day in a life of

movement. When norms are transgressed, however, this is when we see problems that overflow beyond the standard roles of a librarian or library staff (e.g. when a person is experiencing trauma such as grief, violence, homelessness, food deprivation, etc.). Although libraries provide a common ground for folks from a variety of backgrounds and experiences and all people are treated as patrons who belong, there is still the need to increase support by way of knowledge of resources for the library's most vulnerable populations (Hodgetts et al, 2008).

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