I Just Want Tenure: Mapping Librarian Dissatisfaction with Library Science Scholarship

Margaret A. Browndorf • Towson University

Introduction

This research is formulated on a single large significant assumption – that there exists among readers of LIS literature some degree of dissatisfaction associated with the quality of library literature. It was designed as an exploratory study to determine the shape of dissatisfaction in order to lay the groundwork for further work examining the scholarly conversation, discrepancy between the themes of dissatisfaction and evidence in the literature, and possible causes and solutions for the dissatisfaction. Four rough themes emerged, characterized by a series of subthemes. These are: perspective, depth and relevance; writing quality and presentation; methodology; and innovation and creativity. Additionally, some minor themes emerged, which attempted to explain major themes or represented conversations within the data. I have provided select examples.
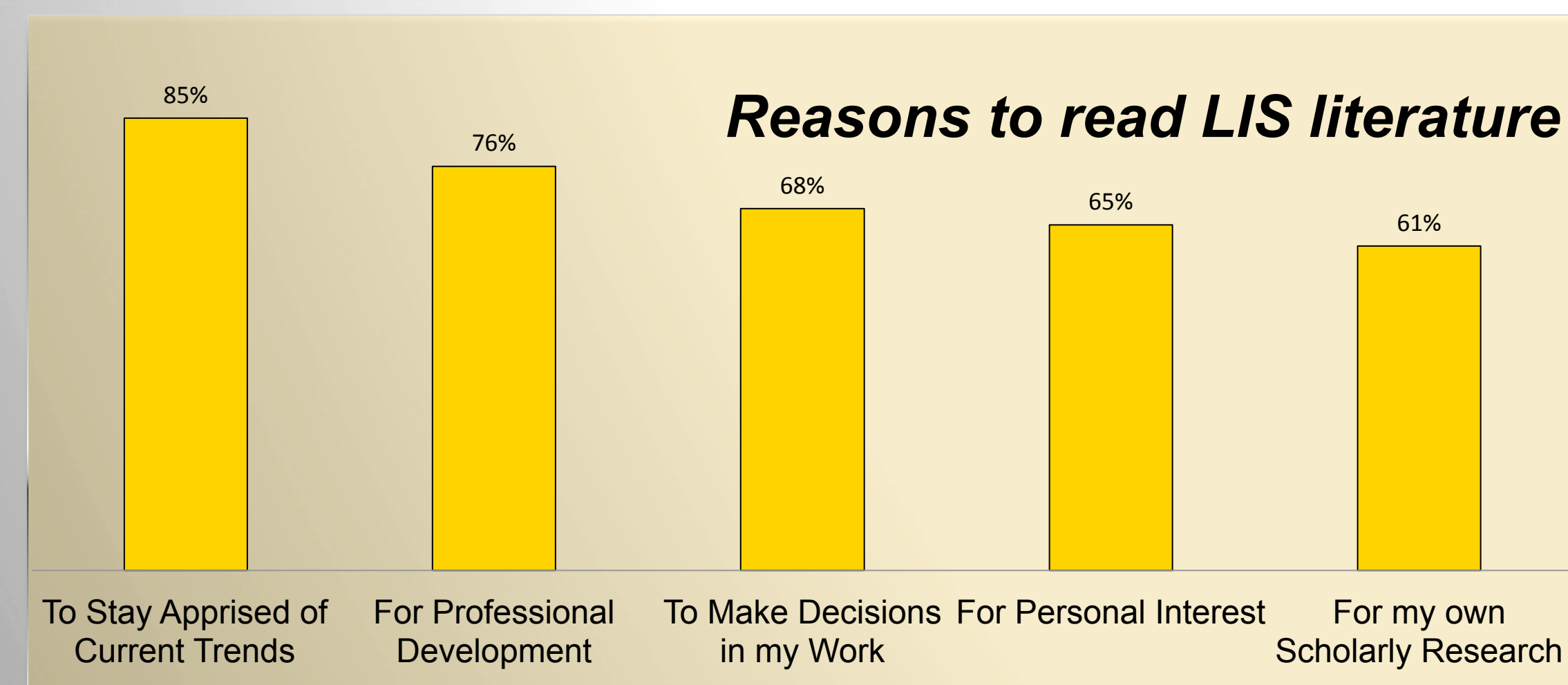
Methodology

A survey was designed to be open-ended and most of the analysis was done on aggregated answers to individual open-ended questions. While the survey asked a total of X questions, 5 core questions were used for the data analysis. Results to these questions were used to determine subthemes, then codified into five larger themes. I then coded for these themes in the aggregate answers, taking into account repeated "sub-themes" under each larger theme.

Core Questions:

1. How would you describe LIS literature that you find useful?
2. How would you describe LIS literature that you find to be of high-quality?
3. How would you describe LIS literature that you find to be of low-quality?
4. What do you find to be lacking in LIS literature? What are your frustrations?
5. How would you describe LIS literature?

Participants, By the Numbers

74 Total Participants: 60 academic librarians or archivists, 2 academically-tracked LIS students, 6 non-academic librarians or archivists, and 6 listed as other.
Of the academic librarians or archivists: 25% held staff positions, 18% held non-tenure track faculty positions, and 52% were tenured or tenure-track.

Reasons to read LIS literature

85% To Stay Apprised of Current Trends
76% For Professional Development
68% To Make Decisions in my Work
65% For Personal Interest
61% For my own Scholarly Research

Perspective, Depth, & Relevance

"…the problem with case studies is, they may not have wide implications beyond the case in which they were studied. I rarely see a case study article where I think 'That would certainly work at my library!'"

"High quality literature addresses important research questions or helps me learn about a new development or trend relevant to academic librarianship. In short, it passes the 'so what?' test."

Subthemes include:

- Theory needs practical grounding
- "How we did it good" literature
- Practicality and usefulness
- Argument and critical/reflective thought, "So what?"
- Scope and translatability between institutions
- Asking important questions to the LIS field

Writing Quality & Presentation

"…most of the time the already poor writing of the authors is made even worse by their effort to conform to the terrible writing aesthetics of the scholarly culture."

"The lack of clarity and concision impedes the usefulness of any literature."

Subthemes include:

- Clarity: language, grammar, or structure issues
- Conciseness
- Engagement with the full scholarly conversation (literature reviews, e.g.)
- Defined problems and solutions, based on evident planning
- Rigor of peer review standards in LIS journals.

Research Methods

"High quality research provides a comprehensive & readily understood methodology with findings that are useful to the reader. These should be able to replicate or model and if they cannot be, then the quality is diminished."

"I wish there were more focus on methodology and research methods. I see too many surveys (irony alert, I'm in one) without considering the limitations of them, and if LIS is a social science, we are woefully behind in quantitative methods."

Subthemes include:

- Thoughtful study design
- Rigorous methods
- Clearly stated understanding of methodology
- Appropriate conclusions for the data
- Methodological variety
- Sample size
- More/better quality data

Innovation & Creativity

"I don't think LIS literature is radically different in quality from other social science scholarly literature but it is lacking in the variety of perspectives found elsewhere."

"I find it lacking in inspiration and madness. I am frustrated by its lack of life."

Subthemes include:

- New questions, answers, and ideas
- Diversity (of librarians, library types, geographic, etc)
- Interdisciplinary research & analysis
- Repetition of studies, ideas, arguments
- Formulation and exploration of theories
- Publication and exploration of failure

Other Minor Themes

"If you're only writing because your boss told you to --- that's not a good enough reason!"

"I imagine some of the things that I find useful someone else find to be a waste of paper – so I don't think my opinion on what's useful is the only meaningful opinion when we're dealing with a very large field."

Some smaller themes emerged characterized by tension between different dissatisfactions, or commentary on the field as a whole. These include:

- Scholarship is not monolithic
- Promotion & Tenure
- Tensions between "more theory" and "less theory"
- Tensions between practitioner-focus and scholar-focus

Conclusions

"This survey is just more evidence that people read (or don't read) the literature with a preconceived notion that it's not good. For my entire long career, it's been fashionable in the profession to trash the LIS literature as being low quality…I get really tired of these complaints.. If this survey can break the cycle of complaint and influence some real changes for the better, what would be great!"

Significant work on LIS literature has been done recently to examine the reality of some perceptions identified on this poster (Lor, 2014; Turcios, Argarwal, & Watkins, 2014; Kumasi, Charbonneau, & Walster, 2013 among others). However, without examining and addressing the perceptions themselves, solid work based in empirical reality can only go so far to "influence some real changes."

This research is about the shape of dissatisfaction not through a defined reality, but through the perceptions of its readers. As the quote above suggests, these perceptions have long characterized the way we frame discussions about LIS literature (Also, see: Floyd & Phillips, 1997 for a similar study performed 20 years ago).

The data collected here, however, suggest that changing perceptions may be complicated. Firstly, respondents often qualified dissatisfaction with literature quality through comments showing they still thought literature may be useful to themselves or others. Secondly, some thematic markers of dissatisfaction blatantly opposed each other. For example, many respondents wanted more theoretical literature and many felt that LIS was too theory-heavy; some individuals wanted more practitioner literature, while others actively avoided it.

Further research should focus on the proof or disproof of these themes in the LIS literature, but not alone. If change is our goal, this work should be done in concert with reader, author, and editor perceptions of the scholarly conversation. Furthermore, it should address why the perceptions, reality, and any disconnect between the two exist in the first place. Lastly, it should extend the research on perceptions past survey results and perform analysis on the public conversation around LIS literature.

References

Floyd, B. & Phillips, J. (1997) A question of quality: how authors and editors perceive library literature. College & Research Libraries 58, 81-93.

Kumasi, K. Charbooneau, D. & Walster D., (2013) Theory talk in the library science scholarly literature: An exploratory analysis. Library & Information Science Research 35(3), 175-180. doi:10.1016/j.lisr.2013.02.004

Lor, P. (2014) Revitalizing comparative library and information science: theory and metatheory. Journal of Documentation, 70(2), 25-51. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JD-10-2012-0129

Turcios, M., Agarwal, N. & Watkins, L. (2014) How much of library and information science literature qualifies as research? Journal of Academic Librarianship 40(5), 473-479. doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2014.06.003