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Mind the Gap: Towards the Integration of Critical Gerontology in Public Library Praxis

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Article

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Nicole K. Dalmer

ABSTRACT

Aging populations challenge public libraries to adapt their materials, services and programming to maximize the wellbeing and functional capacity of older adults and enhance their social participation and security. For older adult patrons using public library spaces and services, the capacity to which the public library has been able to deliver on these qualities remains unclear. In the past, libraries and library staff have been critiqued for narrowly interpreting the needs of older adults, concentrating on aging as a loss or deficit. To understand the current state of Canadian urban public library services for older adults, publically accessible texts, documents and reports made available on five public library systems' websites were analyzed. This analysis uncovered certain gaps in adherence to key guidelines in the Canadian Library Association's *Canadian Guidelines on Library and Information Services for Older Adults* and revealed a lack of integration of older adults' own ideas and feedback for their programs and events. The incorporation of a critical gerontology approach throughout the analysis begins to elucidate this study's findings and calls for the questioning of current conceptualizations of older adults and the library services created for them. Public libraries are uniquely poised to engage with older adults and the addition of a critical gerontology lens in library practice and research will aid in the refocusing of resources and policies to more responsively support older adults' evolving needs.

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INTRODUCTION

As of July 2015, for the first time in Canadian history, the number of adults over the age of 65 outnumbered children under the age of 15.¹ Aging populations challenge public libraries to continually adapt their materials, services and programming to maximize the wellbeing of older adults and enhance their social participation and security. As responsibilities for one's health and wellbeing are being downloaded to older adults and their families and as sites for care and wellness are shifting from hospitals and long term care facilities to the home and the community, public libraries' spaces, materials and programming are even more crucial for its patrons. Public libraries are a key element of the third place,² serving as sites for information and lifelong learning and are a component of a dynamic informational, recreational and educational infrastructure. However, for older adult patrons using public library spaces, services or materials, the capacity to which the public library has been able to effectively deliver on these elements remains unclear. While public libraries serve as a local center of tailored information, given their demographic knowledge of the communities in which they are situated, these public institutions have been critiqued for narrowly interpreting the needs of older adults, reflecting outdated conceptualizations of aging, often concentrating on aging as a loss or a deficit.³

An increasing number of older adults brings attention to different ways of studying, conceptualizing and theorizing the construct of aging and examining what it means to grow old. One such approach is critical gerontology. While no one accepted definition exists, this approach is a combination of different ways of thinking about and constructing old age⁴ and emphasizes the social, political, cultural and economic norms and forces that coordinate and shape aging.⁵ Drawing from the political economy of aging, critical gerontology highlights an intersectional approach, looking at the impact of class, race, ability and gender to better understand the roles, categories and values assigned to older adults⁶ and how these collectively influence how we age. As its name

¹ Statistics Canada, *Canada's Population Estimates: Age and Sex, July 1, 2015*, 2015.
<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/150929/dq150929b-eng.htm>

² Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Café, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You through the Day* (St Paul, MN: Paragon House Publishers, 1989).

³ Margaret Kendall, "Public Library Services for Older Adults," *Library Review* 45, no. 1 (1996): 16.

⁴ Harry Moody, "The Maturing of Critical Gerontology," *Journal of Aging Studies* 22, no. 2 (2008): 205.

⁵ Carroll L. Estes, "Critical Gerontology and the New Political Economy of Aging," in *Critical Gerontology: Perspectives from Political and Moral Economy*, ed. Meredith Minkler and Carroll L. Estes (Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Company, Inc., 1999): 17.

⁶ Martha B. Holstein and Meredith Minkler, "Self, Society, and the "New Gerontology," *The Gerontologist* 43, no. 6 (2003): 790.

indicates, critical gerontology is critical by nature, questioning the formation of gerontology and gerontological knowledge⁷ and reflexively questioning and gradually teasing apart the expectations and discourses that surround aging and older adults, investigating who benefits and who is harmed in the construction of such expectations and discourses.

To allow for a baseline view of the current state and positioning of Canadian urban public library services, programs and policies that serve older adults, this article reports on an unobtrusive, secondary data analysis method to examine publicly accessible texts, sites, events and reports pertaining or related to older adults made available on five urban Canadian public library systems' websites. The four themes emerging from an analysis of these library systems' sites (website accessibility and navigation, assistive technologies, programming, outreach services and documentation) are compared against the Canadian Library Association's (CLA) *Canadian Guidelines on Library and Information Services for Older Adults* and are then further contextualized by interpreting the findings through a critical gerontology lens. With increasing numbers of older adults aging at home and in their communities, the results from this study are evidence for the need of a critical gerontology approach in library and information science (LIS) research, education and practice to challenge implicit age-related norms, discourses and expectations that permeate this discipline.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Canada's Aging Population

Population aging and projections of a country's age structure center around three main components: levels of fertility, mortality and migration.⁸ In Canada, these three demographic forces that shape population growth have "contributed to the almost uninterrupted aging of all provincial and territorial populations over the last 40 years."⁹ The aging of our population will be "one of the most significant social forces shaping our society over the next 20 to 30 years"¹⁰ as the number of Canadians over the age of 65 is projected to more than double from 4.8 million (14%) in 2010 to 10.4 million (25%) by

⁷ Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (London: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 4.

⁸ Nina Chappell, N., McDonald, L., & Stones, M., *Aging in Contemporary Canada* (Toronto: Pearson Education Canada, 2008).

⁹ Statistics Canada, *2006 Census: Portrait of the Canadian Population in 2006, by Age and Sex: Provincial/Territorial Populations by Age and Sex*, 2009. <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-551/p10-eng.cfm>

¹⁰ Institute of Aging, *The Future is AGING*, 2007. http://www.cih-irsc.gc.ca/e/documents/ia_strategic_plan_07-12_e.pdf.

2036.¹¹ Proportionally, the acceleration of aging is especially prominent amongst the oldest-old (those over 80 years of age): by 2056, 1 in 10 Canadians will be over the age of 80.¹² Those over the age 80 are noted to have different motivations for engaging with their community: “they seek social contact for companionship and look at work, lifelong learning and volunteerism as ways to maintain their physical health and mental vitality ... they also have more of the complications associated with advanced age and are more likely to be frail and on fixed incomes.”¹³ While a majority of the oldest old currently live with their spouse or other family members, demographic trends may not allow for the continued availability of family care for this growing section of the population.¹⁴ As a result, public libraries must be prepared to continually adapt their physical and virtual spaces to ensure this growing age group is responsively supported.

As baby boomers are set “to enter the older age group en masse ... libraries will need to appeal to this high expectation group to retain existing members and attract new members.”¹⁵ Born between 1946 and 1964, this cohort, characterized (problematically) as the “silver tsunami”¹⁶ and noted as being both sizeable in number and diverse in its composition, will increasingly highlight the complexities among individual and population aging, requiring the development of “unique policies and practices before this generation moves into their 70s and 80s.”¹⁷ Baby boomers constitute a “... growing population of retired or semiretired people who want opportunities to use their skills to become change agents, problems solvers and community builders. Yet virtually every community has large numbers of older members who are under engaged.”¹⁸ Furthermore, baby boomers are noted to be an “educated, opinionated, articulate [and] well organized” cohort,¹⁹ with ongoing exposure to and experience in working with computers and other technologies. Promising for libraries, “adults in this stage of life will seek out and be in need of

¹¹ Statistics Canada, *The Canadian Population in 2011: Age and Sex*, 2014.

<http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-311-x/98-311-x2011001-eng.cfm>.

¹² Statistics Canada, *Population Projections*, 2005. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/051215/dq051215b-eng.htm>.

¹³ Robert Martin and Alan Pardini, “Booming Opportunity: Philanthropy, Aging, and Recognizing that the Glass is Half Full,” in *Boomer Bust? Economic and Political Issues of the Graying Society*, ed. Robert Hudson (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2009): 121.

¹⁴ McPherson and Wister, *Aging as a Social Process*, 105.

¹⁵ Margaret Sloan, “Developing a Good Practice Guide on Library Services for Older People,” *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services* 22, no. 2 (2009): 48.

¹⁶ Linda P. Fried and William J. Hall, “Editorial: Leading on Behalf of an Aging Society,” *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* 56, no. 10 (2008): 1791.

¹⁷ McPherson and Wister, *Aging as a Social Process*, 33.

¹⁸ Martin and Pardini, “Booming Opportunity,” 118.

¹⁹ Mylee Joseph, “Public Library Strategies for the Over 50s: Everything Old is New Again - Or is it?” *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services* 22, no. 3 (2009): 115.

information to greater degrees than ever before.”²⁰ This increase in information needs and information seeking practices is likely due to boomers’ approach to learning: “many boomers are voracious lifelong learners who want to be engaged in meaningful work and who will not be satisfied with boring or mundane tasks.”²¹

Shifting Responsibilities: Trends in Community Living and Care

The home and community, accompanied by a nostalgic notion of the nuclear family, are increasingly idealized as privileged sites of growing old. This deliberate shift from spending later years of life in more costly hospitals and long-term care facilities to the home is accompanied by an increase in the normative emphasis on aging in place. Aging in place, defined as continuing to live in the same or a familiar place or community for as long as possible, even if health changes occur, has and continues to be a policy ideal. Aging in place is often equated with aging at home, “positioned as positive in that it meets the presumed desire of the majority of ageing people to stay in the homes in which they have lived a sustained portion of the lives.”²² Aging in place is promoted as respecting older adults’ wishes and is “presented as a necessary way of restraining the increase of expenses in a financing crisis of publicly funded care services related to the rising dependency ratio.”²³ The home is portrayed as the idyllic environment to obtain care, where families can provide care that is portrayed as “kind, sensitive and attuned to individual needs and compatible with traditional values”²⁴ ultimately enabling government, policy makers and other organizations that coordinate caregiving resources to withdraw programming and support structures. According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, approximately 85% of older Canadians would prefer to age in place, remaining in their homes for as long as possible.²⁵ The large number of older adults

²⁰ Elle Drago-Severson and Jessica Blum, “Library Leadership for Mature Adult Leaders in a Changing World,” in *Boomers and Beyond: Reconsidering the Role of Libraries*, ed. Pauline Rothstein and Diantha Dow Schull (Chicago: American Library Association, 2010): 23.

²¹ Joanne Gard Marshall and Victor Marshall, “New Patterns of Aging: Implications for Libraries and Cultural Institutions,” in *Boomers and Beyond: Reconsidering the Role of Libraries*, ed. Pauline Rothstein and Diantha Dow Schull (Chicago: American Library Association, 2010): 12.

²² Karin Johansson et al., “Moving Beyond ‘Aging in Place’ to Understand Migration and Aging: Place Making and the Centrality of Occupation,” *Journal of Occupational Science* 20, no. 2 (2013): 109.

²³ Paula Vasara, “Not Ageing in Place: Negotiating Meanings of Residency in Age-Related Housing,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 35 (2015): 56.

²⁴ J. Dianne Garner, *Fundamentals of Feminist Gerontology* (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, Inc., 1999): 162.

²⁵ Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, *Housing for Older Canadians - The Definitive Guide to the Over-55 Market*, 2015. <http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/odpub/pdf/67514.pdf>.

currently in their own home combined with their desire to stay in their homes²⁶ will require innovative supports beyond relying on family and friends, particularly with an increasing number of caregivers reporting distress and burnout,²⁷ calling on public libraries to become a key community space and information hub for an increasing number of older adults staying in their community.

With priorities centered on finding cost effective and efficient ways to provide care, the locus of care and aging for Canadian older adults is shifting, with the responsibility for ongoing care transferring from paid professionals to family members and older adults, with the site of care as the home rather than the clinic.²⁸ The onus on older adults and family members to provide their own care parallels the shift towards a neoliberal stance that eldercare is the family's personal responsibility²⁹ including the push towards aging in place with the assumption that older adults, families and communities are willing and able to care. This shift of responsibility of care from public institutions to older adults, the family and/or the local community is also seen in the shift of responsibility in using information that can support and guide this needed care. Health care providers and governmental structures assume that informed (and thus empowered) older adults and their families will take on a greater personal responsibility for their health, reducing reliance on formal health structures and systems. Increased health information provision to end users (older adults, caregivers, etc.), reinforces the erroneous assumption "that the availability of information automatically leads to understanding."³⁰ This plays into Nettleton and Burrows' commentary that current governmental policies towards the digitization of government-provided information assumes "the 'information rich' will achieve better welfare outcomes than the 'information poor'".³¹ This assumption is highly individualistic, reflecting overall trends in health care and in eldercare, and assumes that a great deal of unpaid work will be undertaken by older adults, family and friend caregivers and community organizations to

²⁶ Institute for Life Course and Aging, *Aging in Place: Bridgepoint/LHIN Literature Review*, 2007. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download;jsessionid=41ABB9DD5C31CA04EDEEA7DB4D3BEC9B?doi=10.1.1.231.907&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

²⁷ Health Quality Ontario, *Measuring Up: A Yearly Report on How Ontario's Health System is Performing*, 2015. <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/2456423/measuring-up-2015-en.pdf>.

²⁸ Euan Sadler and Christopher McKeivitt, "Expert Carers': An Emergent Normative Model of the Caregiver," *Social Theory & Health* 11, no. 1 (2013): 41.

²⁹ Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012): 116.

³⁰ Lyn Simpson, Michelle Hall and Susan Leggett, "Gendered Identities and Caring: Health Intermediaries and Technology in Rural and Remote Queensland," in *Gender, Health and Information Technology in Context*, ed. Ellen Balka, Eileen Green and Flis Henwood (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 39.

³¹ Sarah Nettleton and Roger Burrows "E-scaped Medicine? Information, Reflexivity and Health," *Critical Social Policy* 23, no. 2 (2003): 169.

ensure that the information that is provided can be located, understood, and put to use. Indeed, responsibility for one's health rests on the speculative supposition that "if people are provided with 'good' information, they will be 'empowered' to make 'good' choices".³² With combined pressures to live longer in the community and to navigate and use information by oneself to understand changes associated with health and aging, public libraries may increasingly be called upon to provide information to growing numbers of older adults and their families seeking support and understanding.

Public Library Services and Materials for Older Adults

Services for and research about children and teens are overemphasized in libraries, LIS education, practice and research, inevitably displacing services and research about older adults.³³ In the past, public librarians have been criticized for narrowly interpreting the needs of older adults, concentrating on providing services solely for those unable to physically visit the library.³⁴ Joseph furthers librarians' reported stereotyping and limited support when formulating and delivering activities and services for older adults: "the traditional framework underpinning public library services to older adults focuses primarily on older adults as: recreational readers, technology novices, vision impaired, hearing impaired, family history enthusiasts and housebound."³⁵

Public library services targeted for seniors have traditionally been grouped into the following categories: education (including technology teaching and training), community information and cultural services.³⁶ More recently, Sloan³⁷ proposes that public libraries serving older adults should support four key areas of wellbeing: stimulation, bringing older people together, cutting isolation and socialization and ensuring equality of access. The small number of existing studies surveying public library services, programming, collections, etc. available to and provided for older adults have, to this point, been largely descriptive, collecting data either from libraries on the types of services they offer for older adults or directly from older adults, ascertaining what their library needs may be. Notably, Perry³⁸ conducted an in-depth survey of suburban public

³² Roma Harris, Nadine Wathen and Sally Wyatt, "Working to be Healthy: Empowering Consumers or Citizens?" in *Configuring Health Consumers: Health Work and the Imperative of Personal Responsibility*, ed. Roma Harris, Nadine Wathen and Sally Wyatt (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010): 212.

³³ Katelyn Angell, "Boom or Bust: The Need for Senior Services Librarians," *Progressive Librarian* 32 (2009): 34.

³⁴ Marianne Dee and Judith Bowen, *Library Services to Older People* (London: British Library, 1986); Kendall, "Public Library Services," 16.

³⁵ Joseph, "Public Library Strategies," 116.

³⁶ Kendall, "Public Library Services," 17.

³⁷ Sloan, "Developing a Good Practice Guide," 49.

³⁸ Claudia Perry, "Information Services to Older Adults: Initial Findings from a Survey of Suburban Libraries," *The Library Quarterly* 84, no. 3 (2014).

libraries in two American metropolitan areas. She reported that library systems require more frequent data collection on services to older adults to ascertain the efficacy and degree of fit between services and older adults' actual needs, of particular importance given the evolving shape and composition of older adults. Evaluating public library websites from each of the fifty United States' capitals to determine the number of programs specifically directed towards older adults, Bennett-Kapusniak found that very little programming was specifically targeted and crafted for older adults.³⁹ The aforementioned studies describe findings typical of research documenting public library services for older adults, though a Canadian-focused study documenting the availability and positioning of public library services and materials for older adults in Canada has yet to be done.

The Canadian Library Association's Interest Group on Services for Older People proposed, in 1999, the *Canadian Guidelines on Library and Information Services for Older Adults*.⁴⁰ These guidelines are similar to the American Library Association *Guidelines for Library and Information Services to Older Adults* and were crafted to serve as a checklist for libraries to "use in planning services that are inclusive of older adults, and that will encourage a greater use of libraries by this growing population."⁴¹ Approved in 2002 and revised in 2009, the eight overarching guidelines (each with three to eight supporting subpoints) are as follows: acquire current data about the older population and incorporate it into planning and budgeting; ensure that the special needs and interests of older people in your community are reflected in the library's collections, programs, and services; make the library's physical facilities safe, comfortable and inviting for older people; make the library a focal point for seniors' information; target the older population in library programming; reach out to older adults in the community who are unable to get to the library; treat all older adults with respect at every service point; and provide opportunities for civic engagement for the older adult community.⁴²

The Canadian Library Association's *Canadian Guidelines on Library and Information Services for Older Adults* have encouragingly recognized the heterogeneity within the overarching term "older adult": "older adults are not a homogenous population that can be easily categorized." These guidelines go on to indicate that, "within the broad category of 'older adults' lie several generations with different life experiences and different sets of expectations."⁴³ Encapsulating these statements, the

³⁹ Renee Bennett-Kapusniak, "Older Adults and the Public Library: The Impact of the Boomer Generation," *Public Library Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2013): 217.

⁴⁰ Canadian Library Association, *Canadian Guidelines on Library and Information Services for Older Adults*, 2002.

http://www.cla.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Position_Statements&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=3029

⁴¹ Canadian Library Association, *Canadian Guidelines on Library*.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

CLA asserts that the first principle of serving an older population is to “recognize this great diversity and to be ever conscious of the dangers of stereotyping in planning collections, programs and services.”⁴⁴ Recognizing that demographic changes will impact public libraries and their patrons, the CLA acknowledges the impact baby boomers will have on libraries: “the large cohort of baby boomers now entering retirement are significantly re-defining this period of life and the expectations and specific needs of this large group of active ‘young’ older adults will have a great impact on organizations serving them, such as libraries.”⁴⁵

METHODS

To allow for a baseline view of the current state of Canadian urban public library services, programs and policies that serve older adults and to gauge the preparedness of this essential social institution for ongoing demographic changes, an unobtrusive, secondary data analysis method⁴⁶ was employed to systematically examine publicly accessible texts, links, documents and reports made available on five Canadian public library systems’ websites. The five public library systems’ websites were searched and scoured for any mention pertaining or related to older adults. Data were analyzed using the techniques of constant comparison,⁴⁷ enabling the identification of emerging patterns and development of key themes. This method strategically recognizes the significance of understanding meaning within the context in which the item being analyzed appears and emphasizes “the role of the investigator in the construction of the meaning of and in texts”⁴⁸ while allowing categories to emerge out of data. The CLA’s *Canadian Guidelines on Library and Information Services for Older Adults*⁴⁹ served as the framework from which findings from each of the five public library systems’ collections, services and programs, as found online, were evaluated.

In 2012, approximately 79 percent of adults over the age of fifty-five lived in urban areas (similar to the pattern for all Canadians, with 4 out of 5 Canadians living in an urban setting).⁵⁰ Accordingly, the five public library systems selected for inclusion were

⁴⁴ Canadian Library Association, *Canadian Guidelines on Library*.

⁴⁵ Canadian Library Association, *Canadian Guidelines on Library*.

⁴⁶ Russell Schutt, *Investigating the Social World: The Process and Practice of Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008).

⁴⁸ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 276.

⁴⁹ Since the writing of this article, the CLA is no longer in existence though its guidelines still hold weight in Canadian librarianship. The newly formed Canadian Federation of Library Associations may elect and is encouraged to take up and update this guiding document.

⁵⁰ Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. *Housing for Older Canadians - The Definitive Guide to the Over-55 Market*, 2012. <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/odpub/pdf/67514.pdf>.

located in urban areas, so as to capture public libraries that serve the greatest proportion of older adults. To select a manageable number of libraries to analyze, each of the cities in Canada's top twenty-five census metropolitan areas⁵¹ were assigned a number. Using a random number generator, five public libraries were randomly selected from this list. The five public library systems randomly selected for inclusion in this study serve populations ranging from 222,000 to 880,000.

FINDINGS

While each of the five public library systems surveyed are scattered across the country, each serving a population of varying sizes and differing demographic characteristics, after a thorough evaluation of each of the five public library systems' websites, clear themes emerged with regards to website accessibility and navigation, assistive technologies, programming, outreach services and documentation. Advocacy, staff education and security were three areas noted to be lacking amongst all five libraries' available online materials.

Website Accessibility and Navigation

The evaluation of each library system's available services, programming, materials and documentation were accessed through their website. As such, the ease with which the website could be navigated was considered to be of utmost importance. The effort required by older library patrons to access information about services, events and resources for and about themselves varied considerably between library systems' websites. Patrons attempting to locate age-designated services would have to navigate under tabs labeled "readers," "interests," "recommendations," or "audiences." One library system lacked a tab or site devoted to its different age-grouped users. Furthermore, not all age groups were equally represented. Infants, toddlers, children, tweens and/or teens were often the only available age groups that consistently had easily locatable sites with customized services and recommendations. When attempting to search through upcoming programs, events or services, 'seniors' or 'older adults' did not appear as a population group that could be selected on any of the five libraries' websites. While younger audiences were divided into multiple age groups (baby, toddler, preschool, children, and teens), the overarching term 'adults' was the only available option for library patrons over the age of eighteen, which may or may not be a fitting designation for the library's community.

⁵¹ Statistics Canada. *Annual Demographic Estimates: Census Metropolitan Areas, 2007*.
<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-214-x/2006000/4181384-eng.htm>.

Assistive Technologies

While not specifically designated for older adults by any of the libraries, assistive technologies (any piece of equipment that eliminates or diminishes barriers to information and maximizes independence) were highlighted on all of the libraries' websites as a means to provide specialized services to persons with disabilities, homebound individuals and/or older adults. Visually impaired library patrons at the five library systems surveyed have many options available to them. Commonly available were large print materials (including low vision book club sets at one library system) and descriptive movies available at all five libraries. DAISY (digital talking) books and players were available at four of the five library systems. All libraries highlighted the availability of their Assistive Technology Workstations. These specially constructed devices, solely located at libraries' main branches, combine hardware, software and equipment for patrons with special visual, learning, and/or physical needs. The workstation's furniture can be adjusted to accommodate for wheelchairs, keyboards can be switched for high contrast and larger text, and contents of the computer screen can be read aloud for patrons. All libraries made note of their wheelchair accessible branches. Finally, three of the five library systems are members of the National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS), a repository of books in accessible formats for Canadians with perceptual disabilities.

Programming

Computer and Internet teaching and training classes were the largest component of public library programming for older adults and were available at all five public library systems. Two libraries provided computer training classes for all ages, two offered senior-specific computer training courses and the fifth, while only offering all-ages computer training courses, included qualifiers such as "seniors welcome" for specific computer courses. Two of the library systems relied primarily on computer and Internet instruction classes as their programming for older adults. The remaining three public library systems broached programming more holistically, offering workshops and talks on topics such as health and wellness, including a film series exploring sexuality and the aging process and an information session on osteoporosis and bone health. Other programming included an annual seniors' writing challenge, Wii games and yoga, available resources for bereavement support and conversation classes. Only one library system organized an advisory group for those fifty-five years of age and older, allowing them to be part of the programming planning process. This library was also the only library of the five surveyed that organized an event that was advertised specifically for baby boomers, providing tips and resources on activities available for those entering or currently in retirement.

Outreach Services

Outreach services for older adults were provided by all five public library systems. Available at no cost, library staff select materials for borrowers confined to their homes and then deliver these materials every three or four weeks to the patron's private residence. Three of the five library systems placed stipulations on this service, indicating that materials would only be provided to patrons who were confined to their residences for more than three months. One system highlighted their mobile collection for seniors' residences and apartment buildings. Only one library system surveyed had both an online presence and a physical space dedicated to their outreach services, providing detailed information about senior-specific organizations and resources located throughout the city.

Documentation

Each library system's website was searched for reports, documents or strategic plans outlining an approach or a level of responsiveness to current and incoming cohorts of older adults. While mission and vision statements encompassed a recognition of providing services and resources to people of all ages or a broader mission to provide universal access, few library websites provided documentation that specifically examined or established best practices surrounding services, programming, or materials targeted for older adult patrons. Only one library system published a position statement focusing on services for seniors and one other library system was the sole library to publish a comprehensive planning document specifically for its older adult community.

Despite a thorough evaluation of all five public library systems' webpages, event listings, reports, policies and other documents, there were three notable areas lacking in all library systems: security, staff education, and advocacy. Aside from a brief notation of wheelchair accessible branches, there was no indication that libraries are monitoring the accessibility of their library's physical facilities. Libraries' attention to the security and safety of older adults using their facilities must tend to all facets of the older adult patron, not only what devices they will be using or materials they will check out, but how they may enter and move around libraries' physical and virtual spaces. The second area noted as lacking was continuing education or training opportunities for library staff members about older adult patrons. This area would appear to be of particular importance given the evolving makeup of the older adult population, the rise in the incidence of dementia, the baby boomer population and innovative technologies, collections, and program options.⁵² "Staff training and consciousness-raising discussions on the issues of population aging can change attitudes and prepare the organization to deal with these

⁵² See, for example, the California State Library's Transforming Life After 50 (TLA50) project and the Creative Aging Toolkit for Public Libraries.

changes in a positive way.”⁵³ Finally, there was little indication of libraries engaging in advocacy roles on behalf of or for older adult patrons and their needs in their community. Public libraries have the opportunity to serve as an environment for reflection and dialogue on age and aging. By presenting and interpreting representations of age and aging and by stimulating conversations about their meaning and relevance, “cultural institutions [including libraries] can help to counter traditional stereotypes and promote awareness of the historical and cultural circumstances that determine our attitudes about aging.”⁵⁴

DISCUSSION

While the results of this study represent a selective snapshot of Canadian public libraries’ services, materials, and programming for older adults, data collected from the five selected public library systems’ websites revealed the varying degrees to which library offerings meet the diverse needs of this growing patron base. After an analysis of the results, it is evident that adopting a critical lens afforded by critical gerontology enables and even prompts library and information science scholars, students and practitioners to question embedded assumptions, particularly those that are entrenched in the conceptualization of older adult patrons and the services, policies, programming, and resources created for them.

While critical gerontology is a term used to describe a broad spectrum of theoretical approaches, each is in response to the potential limitations of traditional theories of aging whose lack of critical questioning and analyses are said to “reproduce rather than alter the conditions of the elderly.”⁵⁵ A second commonality that unites critical gerontology theories is the recognition that aging and the issues associated with aging are socially constructed and are the product of sociocultural conceptualizations of aging as a process. Critical gerontological approaches collectively reject the biomedicalization of aging which constructs aging as a medical problem or illness and as a pathological or undesired state. The prevalence of this medical model of aging “obscures the extent to which illness and other problems of the elderly are influenced or determined by potentially modifiable social factors”⁵⁶ and presumes that aging is an inevitable problem to be dealt with by experts.

⁵³ Gard Marshall and Victor Marshall, “New Patterns of Aging,” 12.

⁵⁴ Diantha Dow Schull and Selma Thomas, “Reconsidering Age: The Emerging Role of Cultural Institutions,” in *Boomers and Beyond: Reconsidering the Role of Libraries*, ed. Pauline Rothstein and Diantha Dow Schull (Chicago: American Library Association, 2010): 64

⁵⁵ Carroll L. Estes, *Social Policy and Aging: A Critical Perspective* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001): 31.

⁵⁶ Estes, *Social Policy and Aging*, 47.

This positioning of expertise is an important facet to consider for library and information professionals, ensuring that older adults are not solely viewed as a group towards which services, collections and programming are directed. Results from the library systems' websites revealed, however, that the libraries' programs and services were predominantly unidirectional, with programs offered to patrons with no apparent feedback or advisory mechanism in place. Libraries may need to change to a model of programming that incorporates and encourages open dialogue and feedback from its older patrons, involving older adults and baby boomers in the planning and implementation of programming, using surveys or advisory committees. "Older people's own ideas for programs and events should be sought as part of ongoing consultation"⁵⁷, creating library programming that meets and supports their unique needs. With changing demographics, programs designed for this age group must be shaped to evolve with older adults. This was especially apparent with the available technology-related programming that appeared to be delivered in a basic, one-size-fits-all format. Programs offered by the five library systems were fairly traditional and did not appear to address older adults as composites of diverse ethnicities, sexual orientations, family arrangements, religious affiliations, etc. Furthermore, programming of those library sites surveyed failed to recognize the varying levels of older adult patrons' abilities. There was a lack of adaptability of programs in terms of modulating programs to older adults with differing cognitive, physical or mobility abilities. In keeping with the third CLA guideline ("make the library's physical facilities safe, comfortable and inviting for older people"⁵⁸) it is crucial, then, that public libraries begin to adjust their programming (in addition to collections and facilities) to inclusively accommodate and support all older adults. Recent studies that speak to the possibilities afforded by the intersection of critical disability studies (which critically explore how discriminatory practices are maintained through power structures) with library and archive research and practice⁵⁹ may offer helpful avenues through which critical gerontology may question accessibility in libraries for older adult patrons.

Despite CLA's fourth guideline's prompt to "make the library a focal point for seniors' information,"⁶⁰ one prominent and troubling area of note was the effort needed to locate and access older adult-specific information on each library's webpage, corroborated by Bennett-Kapusniak's similar findings in her evaluation of American public library websites.⁶¹ "A website specifically targeted at older people can demonstrate that they are a valued part of the library constituency ... a library's targeted website can be an

⁵⁷ Sloan, "Developing a Good Practice Guide," 54.

⁵⁸ Canadian Library Association, *Canadian Guidelines on Library*.

⁵⁹ Sara White, "Crippling the Archives: Negotiating Notions of Disability in Appraisal and Arrangement and Description," *The American Archivist* 75, no. 1 (2012): 109-124; Claire Burrows, "Potential Applications of Disability Theory in LIS." Paper presented at 2016 ALISE Annual Conference, Boston, MA, January 5-8, 2016.

⁶⁰ Canadian Library Association, *Canadian Guidelines on Library*.

⁶¹ Bennett-Kapusniak, "Older Adults and the Public Library," 217.

important marketing tool for library programs and services, as well as a gateway into information for older people, which includes both local and national information.”⁶² Much of the information created for older adult patrons was scattered throughout the five libraries’ websites and was not easily searchable. Creating an attention-grabbing link or tab for older adult resources (comparable to those that already exist for children or teen populations), would abate any confusion as to where to click.

Similarly, public libraries may wish to amend the language used to describe or group older adult patrons. Given the heterogeneity within those sixty-five years of age and older, libraries may elect to separate older adults from the general adult group. Furthermore, a distinction between the three traditional older adult age divisions (sixty-five to seventy-four, seventy-five to eighty-four, eighty-five and older) may be of use in recognition of the differences and continual changes in life experiences, housing changes, health conditions, etc. that transpire throughout the older adult years (this recognition of the diversity inherent in older age is a key tenet of the *CLA Guidelines*, though was seemingly overlooked by all library sites analyzed). As Perry cautions, however, the fluidity of the terminology surrounding the definition of “older adult” and the use of age group designations are complex matters that must be given careful consideration depending on the needs of the community each library serves.⁶³ Whereas some older adults may wish to be separately acknowledged from “adult” populations, others may prefer more broad age classifications for services, materials and programming. As Perry summarizes, “how a community chooses to segment its population of older adults depends largely on how it understands its challenges and opportunities and what its objectives are in addressing the issue of civic engagement.”⁶⁴ A public library’s understanding of its community will allow it to appropriately divide its services and activities among the most relevant age divisions. As suggested in the first *CLA* guideline (“acquire current data about the older population and incorporate it into planning and budgeting”⁶⁵), a demographic community profile, updated regularly, can be used for effective and sustainable planning using appropriate descriptors for its patrons.

As further attention is needed to grapple with what distinguishes older adults from other age groups in public libraries (and in LIS education and research) and what it means to be ‘old’, public libraries must be wary of the trend of “productive aging,” a concept towards which critical gerontology also offers critique.⁶⁶ Therefore, while the fifth *CLA* guideline simply instructs information professionals to “target the older population in library programming,”⁶⁷ a critical gerontology lens would caution to first question who is being targeted, to whose benefit and to what end. The construction of

⁶² Sloan, "Developing a Good Practice Guide," 56.

⁶³ Perry, "Information Services to Older Adults," 376.

⁶⁴ Martin and Pardini, "Booming Opportunity," 121.

⁶⁵ Canadian Library Association, *Canadian Guidelines on Library*.

⁶⁶ Holstein and Minkler, "Self, Society and the 'New Gerontology'," 787.

⁶⁷ Canadian Library Association, *Canadian Guidelines on Library*.

“successful aging” in which an older adult’s behaviors and biological and social processes are thought to be modifiable by first identifying risk factors and by then aligning these risks with health promoting activities and choices has now been framed as “productive aging”. Productive aging is the “capacity for an individual or a population to serve in the paid workforce, to serve in volunteer activities, to assist in the family, and to maintain oneself as independently as possible.”⁶⁸ Older adults are now themselves viewed as a means by which to meet their and their family and society’s needs. Problematically, productive aging upholds the market and its values (particularly individualism and commodification) as a priority and ideal and, in neoliberal tradition, offloads greater responsibility to each individual older adult to be responsible for any consequences of aging “unproductively.” What comes to be valued is what is produced⁶⁹ (not the who or the how) and makes muddy how individuals, families, and community organizations (including public libraries) can best support healthful lifestyles.

The results of this study and the guidelines put forward by the CLA appear to paint older adults in a fairly traditional fashion and do not show evidence of implementing any critical examinations of assumptions on which library institutions and spaces coordinate services and materials for older adult patrons. The reflexive questioning inherent in a critical gerontological approach is instrumental in highlighting the potential for library and information professionals as well as library and information environments to be aware of and potentially counter the medical-industrial complex and the aging enterprise, which Estes defines as the “programs, organizations, bureaucracies, interest groups, trade associations, providers, industries and professionals that serve the aged in one capacity or another.”⁷⁰ These overlapping complexes commodify and commercialize older adult’s needs into commodities for economic markets, medicalizing aging and serves to “exacerbate rather than alleviate the dependency of the elderly.”⁷¹ By focusing outreach services “to older adults in the community who are unable to get to the library”⁷² (the sixth CLA guideline) or by focusing programming on basic computer and Internet instruction classes, aging is framed as a loss, supporting a medicalized view of aging. Libraries are environments in which library and information professionals can actively advocate against the aging enterprise. It is troubling, then, that advocacy on behalf of or alongside older adults was a missing element from the five public library systems’ surveyed (and perhaps even more troublesome, absent from the CLA guidelines). In keeping with a critical gerontology approach, LIS practitioners, scholars and students are reminded, then, that aging is to be reframed as a social, not biological, process and one that is not to be fixed or solved and furthermore, that public library spaces can be actively

⁶⁸ Estes, *Social Policy and Aging*, 192.

⁶⁹ Estes, *Social Policy and Aging*, 193.

⁷⁰ Carroll L. Estes, *The Aging Enterprise*, (San Francisco, CA: Sage, 1979): 2.

⁷¹ Estes, *Social Policy and Aging*, 12.

⁷² Canadian Library Association, *Canadian Guidelines on Library*.

constructed as spaces that mitigate or even challenge the potential negative effects of productive aging and the aging enterprise.

Given government policy trends towards supporting and promoting aging in place (given its cost-saving measures) and as “the majority of older adults prefer to age in their own communities while maintaining their health, autonomy, and dignity” (Institute for Life Course and Aging, 2007, p. 9), public library outreach services are likely to increase in demand. Accordingly, library practices may need to be altered to abate waiting lists and ensure that the growing need for outreach services are met. While libraries’ outreach foci appear to be centered on responding to those older adults that are unable to physically visit the library, whether they be confined to their personal residence or reside in long term care facilities, virtual outreach services may be an upcoming area of innovation, in response to increasingly web-savvy older adults and baby boomers. In the future, librarians may be prompted to visit older adults’ personal residences or long-term care facilities to aid in the downloading of e-books, etc. Virtual seminars, virtual book clubs and other online communities may be a means by which to allow librarians to more responsively reach out to and be in community with those older adults unable to physically visit their local public library.

The need for dedicated web space and more inclusive, interactive, and innovative programming and outreach services reveals the need for an older adult liaison public librarian position to oversee, coordinate, and advocate for the library’s activities and materials created for older adults. Angell echoes this need for more senior-specific library positions, stating that the cultural obsession with youth has left “senior citizens to the ranks of the underserved in a wide variety of settings, including the library.”⁷³ This position would ensure that a lack of information or an unfamiliarity with programs and library services is not a barrier for older adults. Much like teen or children librarians, a seniors services librarian would enable the library to have a staff member intimately aware of changing demographics (or the need to collect this type of information) and of specific needs of those older adults or baby boomers in the surrounding neighborhood in order to plan inclusive and useful library policies and programs. Policies intended to serve or assist aging populations must be constantly revisited and revised in the light of new demographic information. Accordingly, a liaison librarian for older adults would be strategically positioned to draw from advisory groups while crafting responsive policy statements. To develop library services that best meet older people’s needs, an older adult outreach librarian will be able to be in constant consultation with older adult patrons, garnering feedback to discover and respond to new and changing needs. A designated outreach librarian can anticipate and appropriately react to the diverse and unique needs of the older adults in the community, acting as advocate when needed, and designing services and activities that reflect and celebrate the heterogeneity present in the community. This staff member can then also gain a deeper understanding of the long-

⁷³ Angell, "Boom or Bust," 34.

term care facilities and seniors service organizations in the area, planning suitable programming that collaborates with organizations in the community.

This pilot study is limited by its small sample size, thus decreasing the generalizability of the results to other Canadian urban public library systems. As this study relied on publically accessible materials, there is a possibility that the five libraries surveyed may have a greater number of materials, programs, outreach initiatives and documentation than are advertised online. It was unclear whether a lack of online documentation was indicative of an absence of older adult initiatives at the public library altogether, or whether it had simply yet to be posted online. Finally, given the “constant flux of the Internet,”⁷⁴ it is difficult to assess the currency of each document or website and the degree to which the website is representative of a library’s current offerings.

CONCLUSIONS

Global population aging is touted as “unprecedented, pervasive, profound, and enduring.”⁷⁵ This demographic change in composition demands action from a wide range of societal institutions, libraries included. Public libraries are uniquely poised to support Canada’s aging population. In order to do so, a greater focus of energy, resources, awareness, and reflexive questioning are needed in order to best support older adult and incoming older adult’s information needs. Public libraries are challenged to critically recognize and incorporate the wellbeing of older adults into their evolving collections decisions, services, spaces, and policies to create increasingly inclusive and welcoming environments, fostering older adults’ sense of independence and thereby strengthening the public library as an essential part of an older adult’s routine and community life. To avoid the creation of potentially exclusive library environments with ill-fitting and underused programs and services, library institutions must be wary of referencing older adults in isolation from other segments of the population based on age alone; an implicit practice that arises politically, socially, economically, and culturally.

Evaluating a library’s place, policies and services for older adults through a critical gerontology lens provides the impetus and the space to ask questions that, up to this point, appear to be unasked or answered: what does it mean to age well in libraries and how is this realized? Who benefits and who is harmed by the prevailing normative standards related to aging and old age in library culture, practice and education? Why are these particular patterns and standards maintained? Integrating a critical gerontology approach into LIS research, education and practice, which promotes such critical and reflexive questioning of implicit conceptualizations of aging, older adults, and the services provided to this population, represents a crucial first step towards creating more

⁷⁴ Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 525.

⁷⁵ Barry McPherson and Andrew Wister, *Aging as a Social Process: Canadian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 103.

critically-aware and responsive services and supports for this growing and evolving demographic.

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