Critical Themes in MLA Conference Abstracts

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Introduction

The Medical Library Association Annual Meeting is a nationwide conference of health sciences librarians. This study sought to determine whether health sciences librarians use the MLA Annual Meeting to discuss critical aspects of librarianship.

Methods

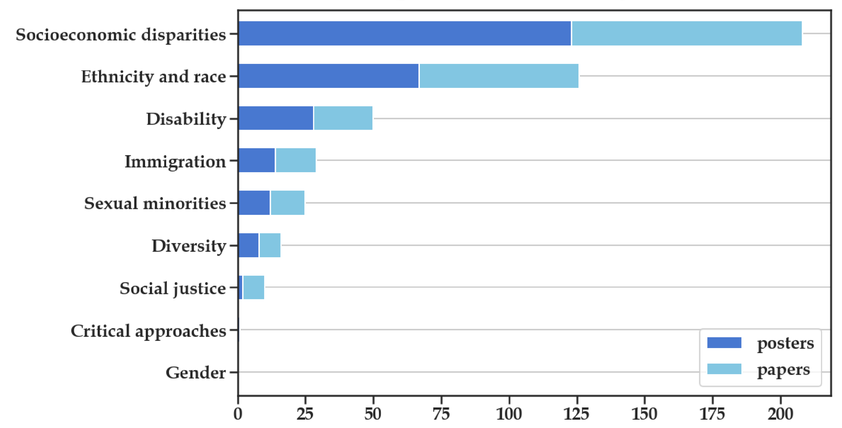
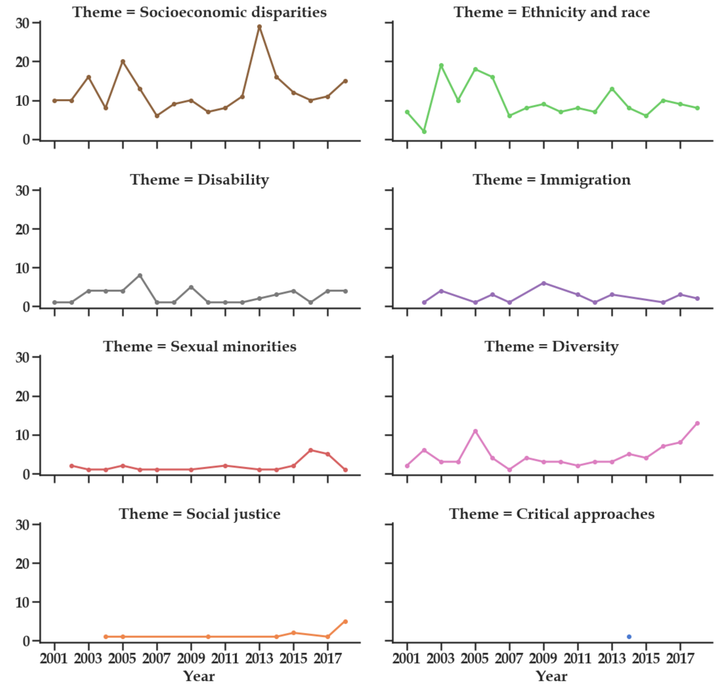
Medical Library Association Annual Meeting abstracts from 2001-2018 were downloaded from the MLA website. Abstracts were searched for broad thematic keywords that could potentially relate to critical approaches in librarianship. The keywords were generated based on the following categories: socioeconomic disparities, ethnicity and race, disability, immigration, sexual minorities, diversity, social justice, general critical librarianship, and gender.

Results

There were 596 total results across all 8 themes. Of those, 473 were unique (meaning they did not show up in multiple themes). The largest theme category was socioeconomic disparities, which included keywords like “underserved” and “underrepresented.” The abstracts commonly describe health information outreach projects to these populations. The next largest category was ethnicity and race, which had significant overlap with the socioeconomic disparities category, Abstracts frequently described their populations using keywords relating to underserved status as well as the race or ethnicity of the group. There were zero abstracts relating to the concept of gender (which included keywords like “feminist” or “sexism”), and only one abstract explicitly used critical terminology by describing a critical pedagogy approach.

Discussion

Health sciences librarians do present on topics that could potentially be approached from a critical perspective, such as outreach projects to specific underrepresented groups, but do not typically describe this work as “critical librarianship.”

Data

All MLA conference abstracts from 2001-2018 are available to browse or download in CSV format:
https://bit.ly/2LBQMuL