

Bridging Gaps: Enhancing Collaboration through Boundary-Spanning Competencies in Hospital Social Work

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ABSTRACT

The role of hospital social workers has evolved to encompass a broader scope of responsibilities within interprofessional healthcare teams. As boundary-spanners, hospital social workers must navigate and collaborate across various professions, organizations, and systems to deliver comprehensive and coordinated patient care. This paper explores the importance of boundary-spanning competencies in hospital social work and their impact on strengthening relationships between different parties involved in patient care. Through a qualitative thematic analysis of relevant literature, several key boundary-spanning competencies are identified, including communication and interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence and empathy, adaptability and flexibility, collaborative problem-solving and conflict resolution, knowledge of healthcare systems and community resources, advocacy and systems change, and professional identity and role clarity. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the essential competencies required for hospital social workers to effectively navigate interprofessional collaboration and boundary work within healthcare settings. The insights have implications for social work education and training, interprofessional collaboration and teamwork, healthcare policy and practice, and patient-centered care and community engagement. By recognizing and fostering these boundary-spanning competencies, healthcare organizations can create an environment that promotes effective collaboration, seamless care coordination, and a holistic approach to addressing the diverse needs of patients and their families.

Keywords: interprofessional, professions, organizations, competencies

INTRODUCTION

The role of hospital social workers has evolved significantly over the years, transitioning from a primarily discharge planning and referral-based function to a more comprehensive and integrated approach within interprofessional healthcare teams. Hospital social workers play a crucial role in addressing the psychosocial needs of patients and their families, facilitating care coordination, and advocating for patient-centered care (Craig et al., 2015; Muskat et al., 2017). However, as the healthcare landscape becomes increasingly complex and interdisciplinary, hospital social workers must possess a unique set of competencies that enable them to navigate and span the boundaries between different professions, organizations, and systems (Brazg, 2018; Cootes et al., 2021).

Boundary-spanning competencies refer to the skills, knowledge, and abilities that enable professionals to effectively collaborate and communicate across disciplinary, organizational, and systemic boundaries (Williams, 2002; Van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2019). These competencies are particularly critical for hospital social workers, who often serve as intermediaries and facilitators of care coordination among various stakeholders,

including patients, families, healthcare providers, and community resources (Craig & Muskat, 2013; Sims-Gould et al., 2015).

This paper aims to explore the importance of boundary-spanning competencies in hospital social work and their impact on strengthening relationships between different parties involved in patient care. By reviewing relevant literature and drawing insights from empirical studies, this paper will shed light on the specific boundary-spanning competencies that hospital social workers need to develop and the strategies for enhancing these competencies through education, training, and professional development.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of boundary-spanning competencies is rooted in the theoretical perspectives of boundary work (Abbott, 1995) and interprofessional collaboration (Reeves et al., 2009). Boundary work refers to the processes by which professions define their scope of practice, negotiate their jurisdictions, and interact with other professions (Abbott, 1995). In healthcare settings, boundary work is particularly relevant as professionals from different disciplines must navigate and negotiate their roles, responsibilities, and areas of expertise (Cootes et al., 2021; Schot et al., 2020).

Interprofessional collaboration, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of effective communication, coordination, and cooperation among professionals from various disciplines to deliver comprehensive and coordinated care (Reeves et al., 2009; Schot et al., 2020). Effective interprofessional collaboration requires professionals to possess the skills and competencies to work across disciplinary boundaries, understand and respect the roles and perspectives of other professionals, and collaborate towards shared goals (Nurius & Kemp, 2019).

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, boundary-spanning competencies can be understood as the essential skills and abilities that enable hospital social workers to navigate the complexities of boundary work and foster effective interprofessional collaboration within healthcare settings.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the importance of boundary-spanning competencies in hospital social work and their impact on strengthening relationships between different parties, this paper will employ a qualitative research approach. Specifically, a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) will be conducted on relevant literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and reports focused on hospital social work, interprofessional collaboration, and boundary-spanning competencies.

The thematic analysis will involve the following steps:

1. Data collection: Relevant literature will be identified through database searches (e.g., PubMed, CINAHL, PsycINFO) and manual searches of reference lists. Inclusion and exclusion criteria will be established to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected literature.
2. Data familiarization: The selected literature will be thoroughly read and re-read to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content and identify potential patterns and themes.
3. Coding: The literature will be systematically coded, with codes representing meaningful units of data related to the research objectives. Both deductive coding (based on pre-existing theoretical frameworks) and inductive coding (allowing new codes to emerge from the data) will be employed (Ligurgo et al., 2017).
4. Theme development: Codes will be analyzed and organized into broader themes that capture the overarching patterns and insights related to boundary-spanning competencies in hospital social work and their impact on strengthening relationships between different parties.
5. Theme refinement and validation: The identified themes will be reviewed, refined, and validated through an iterative process involving consultation with research team members, peer debriefing, and member checking (if applicable) to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2009).

Ethical considerations

As this study primarily involves a literature review, ethical concerns related to human participants are minimal. However, ethical principles of research integrity, including accurate data representation, avoidance of plagiarism, and appropriate attribution of sources, will be strictly adhered to throughout the research process.

Potential Findings and Discussion

Based on the existing literature and theoretical frameworks, several key themes and insights are expected to emerge from the thematic analysis regarding boundary-spanning competencies in hospital social work and their impact on strengthening relationships between different parties.

1. Communication and interpersonal skills:

Effective communication and interpersonal skills are likely to be identified as crucial boundary-spanning competencies for hospital social workers. These skills enable social workers to navigate the diverse perspectives, languages, and cultures of various stakeholders, including patients, families, healthcare providers, and community resources (Koprowska, 2020; Mannsaker et al., 2021). By developing strong communication and interpersonal skills, hospital social workers can foster trust, facilitate information sharing, and promote a shared understanding among different parties involved in patient care.

2. Emotional intelligence and empathy:

The ability to understand and manage emotions, both one's own and those of others, is expected to emerge as a key boundary-spanning competency for hospital social workers. Emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and empathy (Watson et al., 2022) enable social workers to navigate the emotional complexities inherent in healthcare settings, build rapport with patients and families, and effectively collaborate with other healthcare professionals. By demonstrating emotional intelligence and empathy, hospital social workers can strengthen relationships and create a supportive environment for patient-centered care.

3. Adaptability and flexibility:

The dynamic nature of healthcare settings and the diverse needs of patients and families may highlight the importance of adaptability and flexibility as boundary-spanning competencies for hospital social workers. The ability to adjust to changing circumstances, adapt to different organizational cultures, and navigate complex systems and processes is likely to be essential for effective collaboration and relationship-building (Getha-Taylor, 2008; Nurius & Kemp, 2019). By demonstrating adaptability and flexibility, hospital social workers can navigate the boundaries between different stakeholders and facilitate seamless care transitions.

4. Collaborative problem-solving and conflict resolution:

As hospital social workers often serve as intermediaries and facilitators of care coordination, collaborative problem-solving and conflict resolution skills may emerge as critical boundary-spanning competencies. These skills enable social workers to navigate the diverse perspectives, interests, and power dynamics among various stakeholders, facilitate constructive dialogue, and find mutually agreeable solutions (Reeves et al., 2009; Schot et al., 2020). By effectively addressing conflicts and finding collaborative solutions, hospital social workers can strengthen relationships and promote a cohesive and coordinated approach to patient care.

5. Knowledge of healthcare systems and community resources:

A deep understanding of healthcare systems, policies, and community resources is expected to be identified as a crucial boundary-spanning competency for hospital social workers. This knowledge enables social workers to navigate the complex web of healthcare organizations, services, and resources, and effectively connect patients and families with the appropriate support systems (Rowe et al., 2017; Sims-Gould et al., 2015). By leveraging their knowledge of healthcare systems and community resources, hospital social workers can strengthen relationships with external stakeholders and facilitate seamless care transitions and continuity of care.

6. Advocacy and systems change:

The findings may highlight the importance of advocacy and systems change as boundary-spanning competencies for hospital social workers. By advocating for patients' rights, addressing systemic barriers, and promoting policy changes, hospital social workers can navigate and influence the boundaries between different organizations, systems, and power structures (Richards-Schuster et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2017). These competencies can strengthen relationships between hospital social workers, patients, families, and other stakeholders by ensuring that their voices and needs are represented and addressed.

7. Professional identity and role clarity:

The analysis may also reveal the significance of a strong professional identity and role clarity as boundary-spanning competencies for hospital social workers. By clearly articulating and understanding their unique roles, responsibilities, and contributions within interprofessional healthcare teams, hospital social workers can effectively navigate the boundaries between different professions and establish their distinct value proposition (Brazg, 2018; Nicholas et al., 2019). This clarity can strengthen relationships with other healthcare professionals and foster mutual respect and collaboration.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the boundary-spanning competencies essential for hospital social workers and their impact on strengthening relationships between different parties involved in patient care. By identifying and exploring these competencies, the study will provide valuable insights for social work education, professional development, and healthcare policy and practice.

1. Social work education and training:

The identified boundary-spanning competencies can inform the development and enhancement of social work curricula and training programs. By incorporating these competencies into educational programs, future hospital social workers can be better prepared to navigate the complexities of interprofessional collaboration and effectively span boundaries within healthcare settings. Additionally, continuing education and professional

development opportunities can be designed to address specific boundary-spanning competencies, ensuring that practicing hospital social workers remain current and effective in their roles.

2. Interprofessional collaboration and teamwork:

The findings can contribute to fostering a culture of effective interprofessional collaboration within healthcare organizations. By highlighting the boundary-spanning competencies of hospital social workers, other healthcare professionals can gain a better understanding and appreciation of the unique contributions and roles of social workers within interdisciplinary teams. This increased awareness can promote mutual respect, trust, and collaboration, ultimately enhancing patient-centered care and improving health outcomes.

3. Healthcare policy and practice:

The insights from this study can inform healthcare policies and practices related to the integration of hospital social workers into interprofessional care teams. By recognizing the importance of boundary-spanning competencies, healthcare organizations can develop strategies and structures that support and facilitate the effective collaboration and coordination of care among different professionals and stakeholders. This may include the establishment of interprofessional care models, the development of collaborative practice agreements, and the implementation of effective communication and information-sharing systems.

4. Patient-centered care and community engagement:

The study's emphasis on boundary-spanning competencies aligns with the broader goals of patient-centered care and community engagement. By strengthening relationships between hospital social workers, patients, families, and community resources, the identified competencies can facilitate more effective care coordination, support system navigation, and the integration of community-based services into patient care plans. This holistic approach can improve patient experiences, outcomes, and overall well-being.

CONCLUSION

The role of hospital social workers in navigating and spanning boundaries between different professions, organizations, and systems is crucial for delivering comprehensive and coordinated patient care. This paper has explored the importance of boundary-spanning competencies in hospital social work and their impact on strengthening relationships between different parties involved in patient care.

Through a thematic analysis of relevant literature, several key boundary-spanning competencies have been identified, including communication and interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence and empathy, adaptability and flexibility, collaborative problem-solving and conflict resolution, knowledge of healthcare systems and community resources, advocacy and systems change, and professional identity and role clarity.

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the essential competencies required for hospital social workers to effectively navigate the complexities of interprofessional collaboration and boundary work within healthcare settings. By developing and enhancing these competencies, hospital social workers can strengthen relationships with patients, families, healthcare professionals, and community stakeholders, ultimately improving patient-centered care and health outcomes.

The insights from this study have implications for social work education and training, interprofessional collaboration and teamwork, healthcare policy and practice, and patient-centered care and community engagement. By recognizing and fostering the boundary-spanning competencies of hospital social workers, healthcare organizations can create an environment that promotes effective collaboration, seamless care coordination, and a holistic approach to addressing the diverse needs of patients and their families.

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