A new partnership emerges

Social work and engineering researchers join forces

By Charli Engelhorn

A mutually beneficial relationship between the disciplines of social work and engineering is not necessarily an obvious combination.

However, leaders from the USC School of Social Work and USC Viterbi School of Engineering believe collaboration between the two fields is a completely appropriate development.

“There is an organic relationship between social work and several other disciplines in a historical holistic perspective,” said Haluk Soydan, associate dean of research at the USC School of Social Work and director of the school’s Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services. “Engineering is about technical solutions and social work is about social solutions. When you come down to it, there are questions and areas of interest that make them close to each other.”
As a young scholar in Taiwan, Shinyi Wu felt like she was being pulled in opposite directions.

Despite being drawn to the social sciences and efforts to improve societal well-being, she possessed a strong desire to pursue a career in the natural sciences and engineering. At that time, those interests led down separate and mutually exclusive paths in academia.

Eventually settled on industrial engineering, but she never lost her passion for viewing ways to improve the health and well-being of vulnerable individuals from a wider perspective.

"All along, I kept an eye toward social sciences and how my engineering methodology could be applied to solve social problems," she said.

Now has an opportunity to meld those interests as the new member of the USC School of Social Work faculty. The associate professor, who transitioned from her previous post at the USC Viterbi School of Engineering earlier this year, said she is excited to tackle issues facing the U.S. health care system such as chronic illness, aging, and the rising cost of care.

"Social work is the engineering equivalent of the social sciences," Wu said. "I think we can use many of the things we learn in engineering to address social issues."

Bringing a fresh perspective to the social work profession is critical to addressing large-scale problems such as challenges facing health care professionals, said William Vega, provost professor with the USC School of Social Work and executive director of the USC Roybal Institute on Aging.

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From the Director

It cannot be emphasized enough how richly the current issue of Hamovitch PI reflects the multidisciplinary nature of the USC School of Social Work's research enterprise. The school has made history recently by hiring an engineer, as well as a social worker, to join the ranks of its scholarly faculty. The marriage between social work and engineering is strategically designed to propel the pursuit of better and more efficient solutions to human and societal problems. We also report on some of our empirical studies on critical issues in social work, including the effect of housing on HIV risk among individuals experiencing homelessness, and patterns of heavy drinking among gay and lesbian teens under stress.

Big data, or large amounts of information characterized by many variables ranging from genetic to behavioral to social characteristics of very large populations, is one of the most exciting developments of modern research and holds the promise of improving lives and societies. California Gov. Jerry Brown honored one of our researchers for extraordinary efforts and contributions to science — the Commissioner's Award from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families. Finally, we delve into the innovative research of a doctoral professor at the USC School of Social Work who is seeking the secrets of long life in cultures around the world. Enjoy this summer issue of Hamovitch PI.

Newest faculty member brings fresh perspective to social work

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Shinyi Wu
Study explores how housing affects HIV risk

Transitioning from a life on the streets to permanent supportive housing undoubtedly has benefits for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.

Researchers have found that the stability of having a place to call home may enable individuals to seek treatment for drug use problems, develop stronger ties to positive social networks, drug use, and mental health symptoms among chronically homeless individuals in Los Angeles.

Inspired by discussions with housing providers in downtown Los Angeles, Henwood and Rhodes invited 24 participants to take part in their study of permanent supportive housing. The researchers wanted to understand how moving to permanent housing affects HIV risk and behavior changes in patients transitioning from chronic homelessness.

“It’s very clear that housing works to end homelessness, but there’s nothing to say it addresses everyone’s problems or that it won’t create some other problems,” said Benjamin Henwood.

Researchers find lesbian and gay teens more likely to binge drink

Adolescence is an innately tumultuous period during which teenagers begin to form unique identities and transition from childhood to adulthood.

That transition can be particularly difficult for young girls and boys who identify as sexual minorities—lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). They may experience stressors that place them at high risk of engaging in negative behaviors such as heavy alcohol use, an issue explored in a recent study by Jeremy Goldbach, an assistant professor with the USC School of Social Work.

“We wanted to understand whether stress that is unique to being gay, like having homophobic experiences such as bullying, lack of family support, internalized feelings of shame and stigma, and a lack of peer support networks, was associated with binge drinking,” he said.

Goldbach worked alongside Sherre Schragter, director of research in the Division of Hospital Medicine at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, and Ian Holloway, a former doctoral student in social work at USC and now an assistant professor with the Department of Social Welfare at UCLA. Using data from a national survey of more than 1,200 LGB adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17, the researchers examined links among sources of stress, psychological distress, and binge drinking.

Results suggest that stress factors experienced by LGB youths, including internalized homophobia and victimization, are associated with patterns of heavy drinking. In particular, Goldbach and his colleagues found that 18 percent of LGB individuals living in households characterized as religious and antigay were more likely to binge drink. He also noted their level of outness, or the extent to which their sexual orientation is known to family members, friends, coworkers, and others, also influences their alcohol use.

“Within that half a percent, only 18 percent went to anything outside of HIV risk among young men,” he said. “Looking at adolescence, a critical identity formation period, is important. What happens when you are 14, 15, or 16 has the potential to really change your entire life trajectory.”

“Researchers plan to conduct interviews and focus groups to explore changes in risk behaviors and relationships among 25 individuals in the months after they entered housing. One of the primary things we saw was that people were having more sex and were having more unprotected sex,” Henwood said. “Romantic, sexual relationships are a huge part of people’s lives. Even though we want people to use condoms and we want to reduce HIV risk behavior, we also want people to live really wonderful, fulfilling lives, and having a partnership that may be represented by the sexual behavior we’re seeing is in some ways a positive sign.”

Surprised to find a dearth of research on HIV risk and the provision of HIV prevention services for people in permanent supportive housing except for individuals who had already been diagnosed with HIV or AIDS, the research team devised a longitudinal study to track chronically homeless individuals as they transitioned to housing. In addition to surveying patients at key points during the course of one year, the researchers plan to conduct interviews and focus groups to explore changes in risk behaviors and relationships among 25 individuals in the months after they entered housing.

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Scholar seeks secrets of long life

IN THE LUSH, VERDANT HILLS OF INDIA, BHAGAVAN KANI RISES FROM HIS BED.

He spends a few serene moments gazing at the morning sun as it crests the horizon, sipping water infused with a local spice leaf called "tudi." Kani eats a simple breakfast of raw vegetables and fruits. Barefoot, he sweeps the leaves from a dirt path in his garden and climbs steep stone steps to take a stroll through the hilly village. Later that day, he sits outside his coconut-leaf-thatched hut, recites tribal songs, and talks to plants and animals. It's a quiet existence that normally wouldn't garner much attention. But Kani, who is approximately 115 years old, during a field study in 2008, experienced many of the traditions and holistic health practices that are now a focus of his field studies and research.

Nair's ethnic origin is Kerala, a state on the southwest coast of India known as "God's own country." As a child, he experienced many of the traditions and holistic health practices that are now a focus of his field studies and research. He shares his insights about longevity during seminars and presentations worldwide, the USP School of Social Work, is fascinated for one simple reason—the man is more than 100 years old.

People are definently living longer," Nair said. "I'm not saying that medical advances have nothing to do with it, but there are other reasons. There must be something beyond their genes, maybe something we can document."

Through interviews and visits with dozens of centenarians around the world, Nair is exploring lifestyle factors that may influence health and promote longevity. He has identified 11 attributes shared by all his study subjects, regardless of their socioeconomic background. Nair is hopeful that his findings will bring legitimacy to practices that are often overlooked and sometimes scorned by the health care establishment, such as spiritual rituals, a positive outlook on life, and various traditional healing practices.

"We can learn from them instead of judging before really understanding," he said. "That is why my dream is to be these traditional healers to our campus to sit down and listen to them."

Nair has embraced much of this lifestyle himself. He practices early morning sun gazing, yoga, and mindfulness meditation, and has a positive perspective on life in general. Very careful about what enters his body, Nair maintains a vegan diet, grows his own sprouts, and drinks plenty of fresh water.

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Along with several colleagues, Nair cowrote a book called Healing across Cultures and produced a mini-courser entitled Healing Visions of India. He became interested in possible connections between lifestyle and longevity when conducting field studies as a senior Fulbright scholar in Sri Lanka. Even though he had the funds to afford a nice house and a chauffeur while studying there, he asked instead to be placed with a family in a remote village. In Sri Lanka, Nair began exploring the correlations among social, cultural, spiritual, dietary, physical, and mental habits and the promotion of health and well-being among elders.

"The scientific community is slow to accept these practices," he said. "But if there is a practice that has lived to 100 and did not use modern medicine very often, there is value in sitting and listening to them."

Nair has traveled to Hong Kong, Macau, Peru, Hawaii, Canada, and India to seek out centenarians, and is planning a trip to Japan. He has found that many of the people he interviews share common characteristics. They have a general air of optimism and positivity and try to instill that attitude in others around them," Nair said. "They engage in physical and mental activity on a daily basis, often cleaning, walking, gardening, cooking, reading, writing, and memorizing - a process of positive connections and building trust.

"They laugh. They say, we've known for thousands of years that this works. It's a tradition passed along from generation to generation."

Many of the centenarians he has met practice careful eating habits; most are vegetarians who consume fresh vegetables and fruits, spices, and herbs in small but regular amounts. "He practices careful eating habits; most are vegetarians who consume fresh vegetables and fruits, spices, and herbs in small but regular amounts.

In recognition of her contributions to the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect through the use of "big data," Emily Putnam-Horneinstein has received the Commissioner's Award from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families.

The assistant professor at the USC School of Social Work has worked collaboratively with other researchers and state leaders in California to link massive sets of data on child welfare and well-being to examine issues such as maltreatment and poor academic performance. California Gov. Jerry Brown and other state leaders selected Putnam-Horneinstein to receive the prestigious award, given annually to one person from each state and U.S. territory, during the National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect.

"It's certainly very flattering to be acknowledged, and it's even more meaningful when you know that a group of colleagues you've worked closely with were the ones who nominated you," Putnam-Horneinstein said. She stressed the collaborative nature of the partnership between officials with the California Department of Social Services and researchers interested in child well-being, including colleagues at UC Berkeley's California Child Welfare Indicators Project. Putnam-Horneinstein completed her doctoral studies at UC Berkeley and said the experience gave her insight into the importance of cultivating positive connections and building trust.

"We have the data and the technology," she said. "It's often relationships that prove problematic with projects like this. Being a part of that team (at UC Berkeley) is tremendously valuable."

Putnam-Horneinstein is capitalizing on those relationships at the state level to lead a new project funded by First 5 LA to develop a research repository that will integrate data across state and local agencies. She is working closely with Jacquelyn McCloskey, the John Milner Professor of Child Welfare at the USC School of Social Work, to develop the Children's Data Network, which seeks to foster collaboration among researchers, policy makers, agency leaders, and community officials to improve services for children and their families. 

Gov. Brown honors researcher for big-data work

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Professor guides effort to improve juvenile detention

For decades, young people who ran afoul of the law found themselves in dismal locked facilities, surrounded by barbed wire and chain-link fences.

These jail-like structures, featuring large dormitories and staff members who relied on a controlling and coercive model of oversight, have proven to be ineffective and harmful, leading to increased recidivism, lower academic achievement, issues surrounding juvenile justice, not that this is a jail.”

New camps and juvenile detention facilities being built throughout the country are more reminiscent of an academic campus, with grass and trees surrounding buildings with broad windows that allow plenty of natural light.

As a young probation officer and recent college graduate, McCroskey had the opportunity to work with those families and came to realize that many adults. She worked closely with girls in a family treatment unit and came to realize that many were struggling with sexual abuse, trauma and ancestral stress that led them to engage in delinquent behavior.

“Having the opportunity early on to work with those families and those girls led me to want to work on systems at the macro level,” she said. “I loved working with the kids, but I could see the whole system needed to change.”

Although she eventually pursued research and advocacy initiatives focused on other areas, including early childhood education and community-based support services for young families, McCroskey said having the opportunity to return to issues surrounding juvenile justice is gratifying.

“I was delighted to be recruited to do this work, particularly when we started seeing these changes in Los Angeles County,” McCroskey said. “There has been strong leadership and a real desire to improve things and make sure the programming is what it needs to be.”

“We need to send the message that these kids have something to offer. Yes, they have committed crimes that we have to address, but they are still kids.”

Jacquelyn McCroskey

State legislators approved $300 million in bond funding in 2007 to improve county juvenile detention facilities, and McCroskey and her fellow committee members will offer recommendations for a second round of proposals to allocate approximately $80 million in remaining money.

During the past two years, McCroskey has advised county leaders who successfully lobbied for state funding during the initial round of proposals about designing probation camps that are more rehabilitative in nature. She credited the leadership of Jerry Powers, the county’s chief probation officer, as well as Arturo Delgado, superintendent of the county’s Office of Education, for spearheading efforts to overhaul services for youths in those facilities.

“There has been a real effort to rebuild one facility and to spread this set of more effective ideas about programming to other facilities,” she said.

Los Angeles County currently boasts the largest juvenile justice system in the nation, featuring three juvenile halls and 14 probation camps. On any given day, approximately 2,000 youths are confined in those facilities. Although the newest camp was built in the early 1990s, McCroskey said many of the structures date back to the 1960s and resemble penitentiaries, with barrack-style dormitories rimmed by perimeter fences topped with razor wire.

“They have that very old-style, institutional look,” she said, adding, “You can certainly do this new style of programming in an old facility, but it’s so much easier if the message is that this is about rehabilitation and restorative justice, not that this is a jail.”

New camps and juvenile detention facilities being built throughout the country are more reminiscent of an academic campus, with grass and trees surrounding buildings with broad windows that allow plenty of natural light.

As a young probation officer and recent college graduate, McCroskey had the opportunity to see firsthand how detention facilities affected young adults. She worked closely with girls in a family treatment unit and came to realize that many were struggling with sexual abuse, trauma and ancestral stress that led them to engage in delinquent behavior.

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Thanks to Tambe’s computer science background, he also was able to use game-like modeling to assess their strategies without having to test them on people first. The next phase for Rice and Tambe will include a paper and grant applications during the coming year.

Soydan sees the use of computational science as a source of potential for social work, especially in terms of large-scale datasets known as big data. In his new book Evidence-Based Practice in Social Work: Developmental Professional Cultures, coauthored with colleague Lawrence Palinkas, the Albert G. and Frances Lomas Feldman Professor of Social Policy and Health, big data is described as having the potential to open up new horizons in the tracking of diseases and dysfunctions in society and to improve understanding of collective behavior patterns across national and cultural borders.

“Big data are contingent upon and committed by advances in computational science,” they wrote. “Collection and use of big data is now possible and can be done at a low cost. Although the use of big data helps enable a wider perspective of human behavior, Yortsos believes social science still does not encompass the concept of determination as the natural sciences. This lack of determination makes the development of solutions more complicated.

“With better tools and better methods of sensing and collecting information and understanding through technology, we can find better laws than we have now,” Yortsos said. “Social work will be helpful in making these laws not empirical, but more substantive.”

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“This substantive, he continued, will be developed in part by the role of digital media in understanding and explaining phenomena. “What microscopes are to biology, social work is to social sciences,” he said. Yortsos pointed to a potential collaborative project with Hertensia Amaro, the Director of Social Work and Preventive Medicine at the USC School of Social Work and associate vice provost of the USC Roybal Institute on Aging, and Maurice Wu. “Working with Dr. Ell and [the USC Roybal Institute on Aging] allows me to bring analysis and interventions to communities to reduce the burden on the need for health care and get the appropriate help to those who need it.”

“Research is not one person’s business—it’s a team business, and a team is defined as a multidisciplinary group of experts,” Soydan said. “Complex problems require multifaceted and aggressive approaches, and further collaboration between our disciplines has great potential data is in line with the spirit of the university and our school.”

“I define technology as exploiting phenomena for useful purposes—exploiting meaning collaborating and leveraging technology, taking something and making something else out of it. I believe we will see a convergence with social phenomena, and disciplines like social work will borrow or implement or partner with technologies and ways of thinking that have an engineering aspect.”

Yannis Yortsos
HIV/AIDS | from page 9

her colleagues were careful to note that they are not suggesting the permanent supportive housing approach should be abandoned.
People who have lived on the street for lengthy periods of time have significantly higher rates of morbidity and mortality, Wenzel said, and a chronically homeless individual is five to nine times more likely to die compared to someone with stable housing.
“It is simply more cost-effective to provide permanent supportive housing to such a person than to allow him or her to languish on the streets, end up in hospital emergency departments, and cycle through other institutions,” she said. “There can be so many other benefits as well, some that are not so easily assessed in terms of dollars and cents, like achieving a sense of safety, security, and privacy. Housing is also a human right.”
Wenzel noted that positive changes in the social networks of newly housed individuals, such as increased contact with family and friends who engage in healthy behaviors, may decrease the risk of HIV and other negative outcomes.
“It’s very clear that housing works to end homelessness, but there’s nothing to say it addresses everyone’s problems or that it won’t create some other problems,” Henwood added. “It’s definitely a life-altering, complicated move. Any time you give people more independence, there is always risk that comes along with that.”
Examining that risk is clearly a priority at the federal level. The grant proposal received a perfect score, placing it in the upper echelon of submissions. Wenzel said it was particularly gratifying to receive such a positive response because obtaining funding through the National Institutes of Health has become more competitive and challenging in recent years.

Vern Bengtson, an adjunct professor with the USC Roybal Institute on Aging, has received the 2014 Eugene Litwak Award in Public Health from Columbia University’s School of Public Health and School of Social Work. The award is named for a longtime professor at Columbia University who developed one of the earliest graduate programs in aging. Bengtson will deliver the Eugene Litwak Lecture on issues of aging and multigenerational change.

Research!America, a nonprofit alliance of organizations that seeks to make health-related research a greater national priority, has selected Hortensia Amaro as a member of its board of directors. As a member of the board, Amaro will be responsible for urging Congress and other national leaders to increase funding for health-related agencies such as the National Institutes of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Amaro is the dean’s professor of social work and associate vice provost of community research initiatives.

Anthony Hassan, director of the Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families at the USC School of Social Work, is being honored with the 2014 Civilian Service Award from the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. Hassan received recognition during the 6th Annual Heroes Celebration for his efforts to establish a specialization in military social work and develop community-based research initiatives focused on service members, veterans, and their family members

Clinical associate professor Ruth White has published a new book titled Preventing Bipolar Relapse: A Lifestyle Program to Help You Maintain a Balanced Mood and Live Well. The book outlines an innovative program known as SNAP, an acronym for sleep, nutrition, activity, and people. White provides practical tips to help individuals living with bipolar disorder recognize the warning signs of oncoming manic or depressive episodes and make necessary changes to reduce their effects.

The National Association of Social Workers, Region F, which includes Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties, has recognized Leslie Wind with the Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award. The organization honored Wind, a clinical associate professor and associate dean of academic programs with the USC School of Social Work, for her decades of experience as an educator, clinician, researcher, community organizer, and advocate in the field of social work. Dozens of her colleagues, students, friends and family surprised Wind with the award during an annual Social Work Month celebration held in Orange County.

Kim Finney, a clinical associate professor with the Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families, received the Sylvia Blanton Award from the City of Carson for her efforts to improve the well-being of veterans by educating future military social workers. The honor was presented during the 2014 Women Veterans Symposium sponsored by Carson’s Veterans Affairs Commission.