



# THE CRITICALNESS OF LIS

## Incorporating Critical Theory, Pedagogy, and Action in LIS Research, Teaching, and Practice

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### INTRODUCTION

*“More than ever before in the recent history of this nation, educators are compelled to confront the biases that have shaped teaching practices in our society and to create new ways of knowing, different strategies for the sharing of knowledge.”<sup>1</sup>*

This sentiment expressed by bell hooks, though made in regard to critical pedagogy and teaching, is arguably applicable to critical theory and research, critical action in practice, and more specifically what I refer to as the criticalness of (or criticality in) library and information science (LIS). Frankly, the absence of criticality in LIS has presented itself to be an issue that has prevented awareness and lasting change within the field and discipline. Some critiques on the issue point to LIS lacking legitimacy and identity<sup>2</sup> and others point to a tendency of “LIS to adapt theoretical perspectives from other disciplines” without possessing a critical understanding of them in addition to an ignorance of scholarly trends in other disciplines.<sup>3</sup> While there are some LIS scholars who are compelled to confront the biases that hooks speaks of and are pushing the boundaries in LIS scholarship, it appears that not enough are interested in engaging criticality and may not deem criticality to be essential to LIS work. Another consideration is that there are information professionals who are interested in criticality but simply do not know where to begin. Whatever the reasons, this absence of criticality has manifested in various ways, not only in the lack of critical LIS research, but also in areas of teaching and practice such as LIS workplaces, library spaces, LIS classrooms, library programming, cataloging and classification, and most notably, LIS graduate curriculum. The case study I present here first emerged out of my desire to bring criticality into my own LIS scholarship as a doctoral student in information sciences at the University of Illinois, but what later became an urgency to bring more awareness of critical concepts in LIS. The results of the course suggest that a) information professionals are recognizing that criticality is missing from their own scholarship and are seeking ways to be more critical in their work, and that b) that LIS graduate programs are not incorporat-

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ing criticality in LIS curriculum and therefore, emerging information professionals are not prepared to use critical theory, pedagogy, and action in their research, teaching, and practice.

## PHILOSOPHY OF CRITICALITY

*“For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity?”<sup>4</sup>*

This statement by Barbara Christian, which speaks particularly to Black feminist work, exemplifies my perspective on theory, specifically critical theories that address issues of intersectionality and marginalization, and why it has become so important to me, as a Black woman, and the work I do. Moreover, I believe critical theory is vital to library and information science scholarship and should be a component of every aspect of librarianship and in understanding library and information systems. Here, the distinction is made from critical theory which traditionally refers to the Germanic scholars emerging from the Frankfurt School<sup>5</sup> and most times those from other subsequent schools of thought such as Gallic critical theorists<sup>6</sup> and French structuralist and post-structuralist theorists.<sup>7</sup> Instead, I emphasize the necessity for critical theory that has emerged from alternative ways of knowing and epistemologies that privilege minoritarian thought and marginalized perspectives such as (but not limited to) the Black critical thought, Black feminist thought, feminist theory, queer theory, disability studies, and Indigenous thought. While traditional critical theory has been and remains useful to the project of critiquing and interrogating hegemonic and inequitable systems, I advocate for more use of critical theory of the latter variety as these theories refuse to accept the privileging of Western ideas over other ways of knowing, and celebrate pluralism by supporting “inclusion and democratic justice for persons of color, women, and gay men and lesbians in society, bringing a refreshing poignancy to conceptions of fairness.”<sup>8</sup> It is this critical theory that can be used towards the aim of what Amy Allen refers to as decolonizing critical theory, a project that is concerned with “develop[ing] an alternative framework for thinking about history and the question of normative grounding” that traditional critical theory is typically founded upon, with normativity being embodied by Western thought which has essentially created the Other.<sup>9</sup> My personal philosophy on criticality is three-pronged, meaning it should be applied to the following three areas: research, teaching, and practice. Critical theory in research should examine issues through a broad lens that privileges marginalized perspectives and alternative ways of knowing. Critical pedagogy in teaching should share knowledge in a manner that encourages the plurality of paradigms towards creating inclusive learning environments. And critical action should apply theory and pedagogy as a means of resistance against inequities and socially oppressive and dominant systems. This philosophy is a baseline of how criticality can be applied in ways that enrich and enhance LIS scholarship. But a brief exploration of each concept can provide a deeper understanding of their applications.

### Critical Theory

In the introduction to *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science: Exploring the Social from Across the Disciplines*, Leckie and Buschman make the case for why critical theory is necessary for LIS. They state that critical theory “...questions the grounds of claims; it situates human action and structures within culture and history as contingent; it questions categories; and it insists that the critic/theorist is neither neutral nor above the social circumstances being theorized.”<sup>10</sup> They emphasize that critical theory allows us to question and interrogate dominant systems and structures, such as neutrality, a long upheld value of librarianship that many librarians have begun to challenge as a practice that exemplifies white supremacy and oppression.<sup>11</sup> The critical approaches that emerge from certain theoretical formulations provide insight into the problematic components of society,

and allow us to see the domination that lies behind the ideologies that have been imposed upon us. Critical-theoretical perspectives can only strengthen LIS toward a deeper understanding of the discipline that will also impact teaching and practice in transformative ways.

## Critical Pedagogy

In the following statement, Ladson-Billings is referring to her conception of culturally relevant pedagogy which she distinguishes from traditional critical pedagogy as having a strong emphasis on cultural identity. She states “...effective pedagogical practice is a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate.”<sup>12</sup> She makes the case for pedagogies that operate at the margin, acknowledging the importance of identity in criticality, and affirming that critical work is about challenging inequities that exist in these oppressive systems we find ourselves mired in. Incorporating a critical pedagogical lens to LIS teaching equips us with the capabilities to interrogate both hegemonic information *and* education systems simultaneously, within learning environments that are inclusive as well as equitable.

## Critical Action

Critical action is a component of critical consciousness and is a concept that moves beyond reflection and into the doing of criticality. In his article on recentering critical action, Diemer says that it “...is collective, sustained, mobilized action to transform inequitable social structures ...participation in individual or collective action to change, challenge, and contest perceived inequity... [and] aims to dismantle oppressive social systems.”<sup>13</sup> Like with other critical concepts, the focus on inequity and oppressive systems is inherent, but these characteristics of collectivity and participation deserve emphasis as they make critical action well-suited for and essential to LIS practice. While reflection is an important component of consciousness, too often, LIS practice fails to progress beyond serious thought and consideration towards implementation and execution of ideas that directly address the injustices happening in our communities and within libraries themselves.<sup>14</sup> Critical action via activism, social justice, and other means can empower librarians and information professionals to use LIS practice to affect much-needed change in the profession and the discipline.

# CASE STUDY: CRITICAL CONCEPTS IN LIS

## Course Objectives

Having immersed myself in critical theory and other critical concepts as an extension of my doctoral studies, what came next was contemplation about what criticality in LIS courses would actually look like. This culminated in the creation of a professional development course which was facilitated via the Library Juice Academy called “Critical Concepts in LIS.”<sup>15</sup> The objectives listed here provide the scope of the course and the projected outcomes for each participant, but the overall aim was to provide information professionals with a solid introduction to criticality so that they might immediately begin to apply it to their own scholarly work.

- Understand how critical theory can be incorporated into research
- Understand how critical pedagogy can be applied to teaching
- Understand how critical action can inform practice
- Learn about critical theories, pedagogies, and actions that privilege minoritarian intellectual thought and perspectives
- Explore other concepts of criticality in LIS including critical librarianship, critical consciousness, critical information literacy

## Epistemologies and Topics of Discussion

As is evident from the objectives, the course covered six concepts: critical theory, critical pedagogy, critical ac-

tion, critical consciousness, critical librarianship, and critical information literacy. Our readings showcased various epistemologies such as Black critical thought, Black feminist theory, disability studies, queer theory, feminist theory, and Indigenous thought. And our discussions covered a variety of topics related to librarianship including instruction, curriculum, student researchers, archives, programming, and cataloging, to name just a few. We also briefly touched on topics of great interest related to decolonization, social justice, and cognitive justice, as they would reappear time and again throughout the course.

## Participant Feedback

It is interesting to note that the participants represented different sectors of librarianship from various countries (those being the US, Canada, and Australia). Most worked in academic libraries and were expected to provide instruction in information literacy at their universities. But there were also librarians from cataloging and metadata, museums, music and the arts, as well as public librarians, archivists, and even a retired librarian, not to mention current and recently graduated MLIS students. Everyone expressed their reasons for taking the course and their expected outcomes, and as some of the feedback suggests here, there was an overwhelming consensus among the participants to learn about and understand critical concepts that they would then apply to their research, teaching, and practice. Some participants were generally interested in a deeper understanding of critical theory. For example, one participant said:

*I'm hoping this course will help me understand critical theory much more in-depth and understand how to apply it to my work as a librarian.*

Another participants identified specific areas where an improved understanding of critical theory would be useful to their work and increased investment in the job. This participant said:

*I know that a better understanding and application of critical theory will inform all aspects of my job: teaching, management, and broader participation in my university and the field of librarianship.*

Another participant expressed awareness of their white privilege and the desire for self-reflection as a way towards criticality in their teaching. They commented:

*As a white person, I still have a lot of work learning and unlearning, so I signed up for this course in order to assess where I'm at, to be in conversation with others, to find ways to do more critical assessment, and to bring critical practices to our teaching program.*

There were even participants who provided nuanced responses about specific concepts and epistemologies that they were interested. One participant, as a woman of color, specifically identifies intersectionality as being meaningful in their exploration of criticality:

*I'm familiar with the principles of critical librarianship, but very new to critical theory. As a librarian of color + woman (cis-gender), I'm very much interested in how intersectionality plays out in librarianship, and invisible/emotional labor carried out by women of color in the LIS profession.*

What this course and participant feedback ultimately conveyed is that librarians and information professionals are eager to learn about criticality and use it not only to inform the work they do, but also in ways that reflect who they are as individuals. Additionally, they point to the larger problem of a lack of criticality in LIS curriculum which means many librarians and information professionals graduate from programs that do not provide the tools to critique information and education in ways that reveal them to be the inequitable and oppressive systems that they are.

## REWARDS OF CRITICALITY

So why do this work? What exactly are the rewards of criticality? There are many benefits to doing critical LIS work, including the following:

- It enables us to critique hegemonic systems of power, oppression, and subordination;
- Makes our scholarship more relevant to the larger academic society by situating us within a broad conversation happening across disciplines;
- Expands the boundaries of what we know and think, opening up new possibilities and avenues of research we might not have considered otherwise;
- Allows us to critically examine our own positionalities of privilege and marginalization, which is essential to doing critical work;
- And it encourages cognitive justice by recognizing other forms of knowledge and epistemologies emerging from minoritarian thought.

## FUTURE WORK

*“We always have to ask ourselves what are the most salient and pressing forms or states of domination today, how can we identify them, and how can they be transformed or undone?”<sup>16</sup>*

These questions lie at the foundation of criticality and are certainly questions that anyone in LIS should be asking themselves in relation to how we operate within the library and information systems we are complicit in and what we can do to improve them. Looking forward, I will continue to teach this professional development course to gain more insight into how the study and application of criticality is beneficial to the LIS profession. But my ultimate goal is to adapt the course for inclusion in LIS curriculum in an effort towards a necessary transformation of graduate LIS education so that emerging librarians and information professionals can enter into the field having already been grounded in ideas, theories, and frameworks that equip them with the tools to identify, critique, and dismantle the oppressive structures that exist within librarianship and other information systems.

## NOTES

1. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 12.
2. Gerald Benoit, “Critical Theory and the Legitimation of Library and Information Science,” *Information Research* 12, no. 4 (2007).
3. Gloria Leckie and John Buschman, introduction to *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science: Exploring the Social from Across the Disciplines*, ed. Gloria Leckie and John Buschman (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010), xi.
4. Barbara Christian, “Race for Theory,” *Feminist Studies* 14, (1988): 68.
5. See works by Marx, Hegel, Adorno, Harbermas, etc.
6. See works by Barthes, Baudrillard, Lefebvre, etc.
7. See works by Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, etc.
8. Leckie and Buschman, xiii.
9. Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 5.
10. Leckie and Buschman, x.
11. See Cooke, Ferretti, and Pagowsky articles in bibliography.
12. Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 469.
13. Matthew A. Diemer, et al., “Recentring Action in Critical Consciousness,” *Child Development Perspectives* 15, no. 1 (March 2021): 12-17.
14. See articles by Cousins, Jaschik, and Simon in the bibliography.
15. “Critical Concepts in LIS Research, Teaching, and Practice,” Library Juice Academy, accessed April 9, 2021, <https://libraryjuiceacademy.com/shop/course/265-critical-concepts-in-lis-research-teaching-and-practice>.
16. Nisa Mackie, “The End of Progress and the Future of Critical Theory: An Interview with Amy Allen,” *Primer, Walker Reader*, February 14, 2017, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/the-end-of-progress-and-the-future-of-critical-theory-an-interview-with-amy-allen>.

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