Recasting an Inclusive Narrative:
Exploring Intersectional Theory

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Introduction

This paper uses an intersectional framework developed by Collins[1] to critically reflect on current library practice and scholarship and argues that academic libraries are often designed only for those among us who are privileged. Despite an array of diversity and inclusion initiatives, research provides evidence that librarianship's legacy as a predominantly white profession[2,3] perpetuates unwelcoming or inaccessible spaces,[4,5] homogeneous collections,[6] hegemonic practices,[7] and microaggressions.[8] While scholar/practitioners continue to draw attention to ways in which libraries preserve inequities, their work focuses on specific areas in which injustice takes place, rather than holistic perspectives on institutional biases. Calls have been made for more radical and sustained interventions in library settings[9] due to blind spots in the profession.[10,11] However, library and information science (LIS) literature and university provosts continue to downplay the importance of diversity work in academic libraries.[12] To further diversity and social justice efforts, this paper considers how dominant ideologies spread injustice in libraries at structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal levels.

Method and Theory

To recast problems related to inclusion and to further investigate institutional constraints in libraries, a critical analysis[13] of LIS literature was conducted using Collins's[14] theory of intersectionality as a guide. Critical analysis is an increasingly popular technique for addressing issues in LIS that describes, relates, and ultimately evaluates the implications of data.[15] Here, data are a corpus of documents selected from searches in LIS and related databases.

Informed by Black feminist epistemology, Collins's theory is two-fold. First, she describes identity as multifaceted and consisting of intersecting factors (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, nationality, disability, age) that affect how people act and are acted upon in their society. Individuals who lie outside dominant ideals in the United States (US) (e.g., those who are not white, straight, cisgender, able-bodied) tend to be marginalized.[16] Second, she describes how societies function in relation to individuals' identities by breaking them down into four intersecting domains: structural, or social structures that organize power; disciplinary, or bureaucratic organizations who control and organize human behavior through routine, rationalization, and surveillance; hegemonic, or a cultural sphere of influence that legitimizes oppression; and interpersonal, or personal relationships and interactions that make-up daily lives. According to Collins, individuals with intersecting marginalized identities are disadvantaged and mistreated at all overlapping levels of this "matrix of domination." Though her original text frames the matrix as applicable to society broadly, subsequent work argues that the four levels can explain how oppression festers in a number of smaller contexts, including academic disciplines.[17]

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This paper applies the four domains of Collins's matrix to libraries, given that critiques of our profession's dominant orientations toward whiteness[18] and heteronormativity[19] may benefit from a more radical approach[20] that comes from marginalized perspectives. Though the concept of intersectionality has been applied to libraries,[21] this is the first known work to situate libraries within the matrix of domination. It does not purport to create an exhaustive list of every way in which libraries may perpetuate inequities on structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal levels; instead, it seeks to select pertinent examples of each domain that demonstrate how the framework may be useful and that suggest areas for future research.

The Matrix of Library Domination
Structural Level

At the structural level, the matrix of domination includes social structures that organize power relationships, such as those that produce laws and policies. Within libraries, the make-up of overarching structures can be examined to determine how power dynamics produce inequities that affect the profession at multiple institutional access points. This discussion of structural issues in libraries begins with their history in the US to unpack how they may be embedded in patterns of exclusion. In brief, libraries began as private book clubs only accessible to wealthy, white male subscribers; this contributed to pre-Revolutionary War circumstances in which "members of the middle or lower classes did not readily have access to reading material."[22] Early public library movements were led by men from New England's "elite families" who fused institutional values with dominant ideologies surrounding education, law, and religion.[23] Toward the 20th century, librarianship was recast as a female profession second to teaching; here too, the field was only open to wealthier white women, many of whom shaped libraries' institutional goals to "Americanize" recent immigrants and further bar African-Americans from public spaces.[24]

These exclusionary patterns contribute to current structural problems in librarianship where "the library staffing pipeline is rooted in the discrepancies in socioeconomic status based on race and ethnicity."[25] Thus, patterns perpetuate institutional roots in oppressive discourse. Such discourse may even be re-purposed to appear morally and culturally righteous because it conforms to dominant ideologies shaped by white and heteronormative values.[26] In actuality, exclusionary trends contribute to a litany of issues including discrimination against job candidates of color[27,28] and lack of support for librarians with marginalized identities.[29] This may also translate into common language surrounding library "users,"[30] whose often-assumed homogeneity creates false impressions that individuals interact with and experience libraries in similar ways regardless of their identities. Such assumptions erase inequities and may trickle down into services that continue to disadvantage individuals with marginalized identities.[31,32]

Disciplinary Level

Inclusive of bureaucratic organizations, the disciplinary domain focuses on organizational protocols that may mask or fuel discriminatory practices. Regarding libraries, the disciplinary domain can consist of guidelines produced by professional organizations and other institutions that affect research and practice. Consistent with Collins's[33] claims, such materials may address diversity at a surface-level that does not forcefully engage with multifaceted issues underscoring inequities. For example, while attempts have been made to integrate diversity statements or policies into professional guidelines, they may be out-of-date in terms of language and current topics; guidelines are often crafted so issues related to diversity and/or inclusion are in a separate section, which could falsely imply that they are not applicable to all aspects of policy decisions. Additionally, intersecting with the structural domain, such guidelines are produced within the context of dominant ideologies that do not

reflect actual perspectives of marginalized individuals; harm may be "done in diversifying without dismantling power differentials."[34] Policies may also perpetuate the homogenizing and problematic language (e.g., "users") discussed in the structural section.[35]

Bureaucratic decisions and policies-in-action can also be problematic. Research suggests that diversity training programs meant to root out individuals' unconscious biases are often ineffective.[36] Calls for and research regarding the need for increased cultural competency in LIS education[37] highlight shortcomings in curricula that may emphasize dominant values at the expense of promoting diverse perspectives,[38,39] resulting in new generations of librarians who are ill-equipped to challenge their institutions. In aggregate, these circumstances perpetuate problematic discourse in libraries that leads to harmful decisions, such as the recent, later repealed decision to allow hate groups to use library meeting rooms.[40] They also permit racism, misogyny, and other forms of discrimination to continue with little or no consequence, even during major conferences.[41]

Hegemonic Level

The hegemonic domain encompasses the cultural sphere of influence that legitimizes oppression, ranging from everyday language practices to mass media to oral histories passed down through familial structures. Given that libraries create and use classification schemes that organize knowledge, determine what information is available, and affect how information is perceived,[42] it stands to reason that hegemonic discourse in libraries has been noted. Research points out that catalogs promote epistemic and systemic violence against individuals with marginalized identities[43,44]; both formal schemes and tagging systems[45] tend to disservice disciplines and topics regarding race, gender, and sexuality.[46] Controlled vocabulary used in library catalogs may both correspond with and contribute to prejudiced hegemonic discourse; for example, "illegal alien" was not cancelled as a Library of Congress subject heading until 2016, and materials may still be classified under that term.[47]

Beyond cataloging, other problems fall under the hegemonic domain in libraries. Yeo and Jacobs argue that what may be forgiven as "unconscious" biases need to be articulated/challenged and that "our racist, homophobic, and sexist consciousnesses that are so deeply embedded that we don't even recognize them."[48] Thus, library culture that may be accepted as status quo reflects oppression in institutional language and practices.[49] Library staffing models may also reflect hegemonic values when, for example, "librarian" is cast as a professional career while library staff workers are not provided with similar considerations. Additionally, libraries reify dominant ideologies when the data they collect represents mostly white, heterosexual, cisgender, and patriarchal organizational limitations and biases.[50] Libraries may also promote cultural productions that reflect singular worldviews; for example, collections may overrepresent privileged perspectives as opposed to more intersectionally diverse narratives.[51]

Interpersonal Level

The interpersonal domain references personal relationships and interactions that enforce discrimination and oppression in everyday contexts. In many circumstances, individuals with marginalized identities experience discrimination during interpersonal encounters in libraries. For example, research finds that library interactors can experience microaggressions, or often-subtle indignities having to do with their identities,[52] during face-to-face[53,54] and virtual[55] encounters. White librarians, some of whom deny microaggressions' existence,[56] may perpetuate microaggressions against their colleagues of color who already face extra burdens due to expectations (e.g., serving on "diversity committees") imposed by their institutions.[57,58] Library users may also experience microaggressions from librarians based on their race and gender identity[59] and assumed technical proficiency.[60] Beyond person-to-person interactions, individuals face interpersonal barriers in libraries when, for example,

they do not see their identities accurately reflected in library catalogs, collections, and employees.[61,62] Physical library spaces can also facilitate negative encounters given that they are designed with Western values[63] and able-bodied individuals[64] in mind; such configurations affect how potential interactors are able to use spaces to meet their information needs.[65]

Considerations for Future Work

Library scholar/practitioners continue to call for and suggest solutions to problems discussed above. Following Collins's perspective, it is futile to attempt to develop a concrete, universally applicable set of best practices or guidelines for libraries' holistic improvement given the multifaceted and contextually-based structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal inequities embedded in library institutions. However, as Collins's matrix of domination can be applied to library literature, so can her recommendations for confronting the matrix in everyday life. Advocacy work can be placed within the following framework: drawing upon and listening to marginalized individuals' lived experience; engaging in dialog rather than debate; building knowledge around caring or empathy; and encouraging personal accountability among library professionals.[66]

Lived Experience

Current leaders in the library profession should intentionally seek perspectives from individuals who are disadvantaged by discriminatory power dynamics. As per Vinopal, "Leaders can encourage and empower us to engage with essential questions like, 'In what way do I benefit from and perpetuate the status quo and how can I disrupt it?'"[67] This also requires library establishments to listen to people of color in order to create an environment that will not "alienate antiracist colleagues and colleagues of color, but give them room to flourish."[68] This also applies to individuals with other marginalized identities (e.g., queer people, people with disabilities) who may be able to share their perspectives as library professionals, library users, or potential library users; it seems essential to note that only engaging with people who currently use libraries will create a certain type of tunnel vision that may not expose all institutional barriers.

However, it should be noted that the above suggestions may be problematic themselves. While it is essential to listen to and believe individuals with marginalized identities when they share their experiences, it is also key to keep in mind that oppressed people are not obligated to do extra labor in order to assist more privileged individuals. Libraries may consider ways to include individuals with marginalized identities in ways that do not exploit them; for example, library leadership itself should be reshaped in order to dismantle white-washed institutional bodies. This follows a "nothing about us without us" mentality popularized in critical disability studies. Kumbier and Starkey offer further examples of these actions: fostering community-informed access and professional participation; recruiting, educating, hiring, and supporting library workers with disabilities and other marginalized identities; engaging marginalized users and nonusers in planning, decision-making, and service design activities; publishing perspectives of people with marginalized identities in literature; thinking intersectionally about access; and challenging the status quo to dismantle ableism and other forms of discrimination.[69]

Dialog Rather Than Debate

Rather than engage in argumentative discourse, Collins advocates for more dialog-driven interactions to expose and develop solutions to problems at various intersecting levels of the matrix of domination. This does not mean that individuals should shy away from difficult or uncomfortable topics; on the contrary, a dialog approach should function to make those topics more productive means of discussion. Balderrama claims, "We must be able to articulate why we in our profession would want someone distinct from us to work with us […]

To reciprocate with us, not assimilate us […] To be an equal, not a box in the organizational hierarchy. To be a colleague."[70] Considering dialog's utility also allows librarians to recognize conflict as potentially productive and not antagonistic.[71] These patterns of communication should also create or promote spaces and places where individuals with marginalized identities are able to share their experiences to foster critical reflection and analysis that could lead to better support systems.[72] Thus, lived experience and dialog can go hand-in-hand.

Knowledge Built Around Caring

Collins purports that knowledge may be best imparted when information is delivered using an ethics of caring, which means that exchanges involve virtue and benevolence.[73] This is not meant to erase power dynamics, but rather to allow for individuals with marginalized identities to feel cared for in what may be difficult dialogs surrounding their experiences. Such an ethos applies to a number of suggestions made by library scholar/practitioners, including the development of "information justice" frameworks that could affect a spectrum of library interactions,[74] community action research and embedded librarianship,[75,76] and actions taken to confront implicit biases.

Building knowledge around caring may be especially significant when teaching cultural competency in classrooms.[77] Cooke discusses her use of "radical hospitality" in the classroom, claiming that "viewing the classroom through a radical lens has the potential to transform the learning environment and tangibly prepare students to become the critically minded, socially just, culturally competent […] information professionals the field claims to want."[78]

Personal Accountability

It is essential for library scholar/practitioners to educate themselves and engage in critical self-reflection to understand their biases and the effect they have on work and organizational contexts.[79] This requires acknowledging libraries' institutional histories in the US, as well as listening to perspectives from individuals with marginalized identities who articulate their experiences. Schmidt suggests knowledge areas in which individuals may come to understand racism and oppression as systemic phenomena, including individual, institutional, and cultural interconnected levels of racism; dominant and subordinate statuses; internalized racism; white privilege; and historical inequalities.[80] Accountability may be especially salient in the current US socio-political climate, given the role libraries could play in amplifying marginalized voices and engaging in public discourse.[81] Though structurally granted privilege in particular may make it near-impossible for individuals with dominant identities to fully realize their advantages and internalized prejudices, it is vital that scholar/practitioners interrogate, acknowledge, and work to ameliorate the role they play in perpetuating racism, heteronormativity, ableism, and other prejudices along the library matrix of domination.

Conclusion

This paper uses Collins's intersectional framework to explicate how structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal forces may perpetuate inequities within a matrix of domination in libraries. Scholar/practitioners may use the matrix of domination to consider how their actions and institutional contexts contribute to problematic aspects of librarianship that may originate in dominant ideologies including whiteness, heteronormativity, and ableism. Intersecting levels of the matrix are meant to highlight the multifaceted ways librarians and associated professionals may perpetuate these discourses, and thus inspire critical reflection that may help to partly ameliorate longitudinal prejudice faced by library interactors with marginalized identities. Collins's ideas concerning how problems exposed by the matrix may be addressed, which include sharing and listening

to lived experience, engaging in dialog rather than debate, imparting knowledge through caring, and encouraging personal accountability, may guide scholar/practitioners to more effectively address inequities. Given the violence and other challenges to their personhood that individuals with marginalized identities continue to face in US society, as well as the popular belief that libraries are supposed to be welcoming spaces for any person, it is necessary for scholar/practitioners to hold themselves accountable for their actions to better interact with the individuals they purport to include and assist.

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