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# F Is For Feminism: Mainstreaming Feminist Leadership in Academic Libraries

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## INTRODUCTION

> *"At the individual level, we might ask ourselves how a profession so profoundly feminized, so explicitly dominated by women, is not typically characterized as a "feminist profession?" It begs a series of questions: what stands in the way of a field that is more than 80% women of holding up feminism as a core value? What does the field put at stake when it chooses to not explicitly take up an intersectional feminist stance in its practice and identity?"*[1]

Gender and whiteness structure library work in ways that continue to lack sustained critical attention,[2] particularly in the research literature on library leadership and management. Given the demographic makeup of the profession, this dearth of published research is irresponsible, in a generous conclusion. In 2020 just over 83% of librarians identified as women and as white, non-Hispanic. And 78.6% of library technicians and assistants identified as white, non-Hispanic. These demographics make librarians a slightly less diverse workforce than other professionals in educational jobs.[3] Despite being a female-intensive and overwhelmingly white profession, the scholarship on leadership and management published in mainstream library and information science journals (LIS) rarely employs explicitly feminist frameworks or perspectives. By using critical feminist analyses one can address and redress practices and principles in LIS work that have maintained white, cis-heteropatriarchal, middle-class social norms. Furthermore, feminist analyses can be used to dismantle librarianship's commitments to concepts that support those social norms. For instance, intersectional feminist analyses draw attention to ahistorical adherence to "neutrality" and "objectivity" in LIS literature and professional practice and recognize this adherence as inherently political work that hinders considerations of power and frustrates commitments to democracy, the public good, and social responsibility.[4]

## GENDERED ORGANIZATIONS AND FEMINIZED WORK

Class, gender, and race are foundational building blocks of organizational logic, from the language of job descriptions, job classifications and salary ranges, hiring practices, the structure of supervisory roles, organizational structures, communication practices, and performance evaluations.[5] Organizational practices, policies, and processes are "'gendering (i.e., they create gender norms) and 'gendered' (i.e., they reflect gender norms)."[6] Not only are gender norms built into organizations, but organizations also socially reproduce gender norms. Furthermore, gendered

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work impacts access to communication networks and resources, and therefore institutional power. Regardless of one's gender identity, or whether managers participate in masculinist competitive behaviors,[7] those in feminine/feminized occupations are demonstrably excluded from networks that enable access to resources.[8]

Limited political, social, and positional power for those in feminized disciplines and professions within higher education institutions leads to exclusion in decision-making processes despite performing work and delivering curriculum foundational to the mission of the institution. Sicari found a common thread expressed by women writing program administrators (WPA), they experienced that when voicing their disciplinary and administrative expertise, it was interpreted or received as complaint from a "whiny woman."[9] Calling attention to the gendering of certain kinds of work is generally unwelcome within institutional life, it is perceived as complaint. Ahmed describes being willing to hear complaint and being willing to complain as feminist acts. To seek to expose the double binds of gendered, raced, and classed labor in higher education is to risk negation as one who complains: "Complaint seems to catch how those who challenge become sites of negation: to complain is to become a container of negative affect."[10] Feminist leaders that are willing to hear complaint and willing to complain are necessary in transforming higher education institutions into anti-oppressive spaces for learning and working.

## CRITICAL METHODOLOGIES

Feminist frameworks are not simply about women, for women, and by women, rather feminist theory addresses power relations. Application of feminist perspectives means "asking ethical questions about how to live better in an unjust and unequal world," and finding "ways to support those who are not supported or are less supported by social systems."[11] Applied to academic libraries, feminist frameworks would center critiques of and seek to dismantle inequities within higher education institutions, the feminized labor of libraries within those institutions, and the ways in which different library workers are more and less supported within these nested institutions.

In 2020, *JASIS&T*, the *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, the premier professional organization and journal for LIS researchers, called for submissions for a special issue calling for a "Paradigm Shift in the Field of Information." In this issue, Cooke and Kitzie take ASIS&T to task for having systematically excluded critical perspectives that focus on minoritized communities and ignored existing paradigm shifting scholarship "centering the standpoints of marginalized groups" that shift the focus "from computational and white Western norms."[12] Cooke and Kitzie proposed an acknowledgement of an existing paradigm, "Outsiders-within-LIS," that includes "critical sociocultural work that operates from the standpoints of marginalized people."[13] Cooke and Kitzie draw connections between the LIS field's continual search for a paradigm to anxiety about achieving scientific status that would finally "confer prestige and funding."[14] This status anxiety has permeated the field and profession since the first training programs were created and has led to a focus on technology and management models in LIS curriculum and in LIS research. Because of the preoccupation with status, the LIS field "operates within a Western, Enlightenment view of scientific progress" and therefore aligns with "neutrality discourses" foundational to LIS research and practice.[15] These foci on technology, management, professionalization, and neutrality all serve to distance and erase gender and race as relevant research subjects and to "continue to advance existing dominant social structures, most significantly white supremacy.[16] Library work framed as oriented towards neutrality and a deep sense of vocational awe has inhibited critiques of white supremacy, sexism, and classism within librarianship.[17] Chiu, Ettarh, and Ferreti argue that neutrality as a professional standard of service assume we live in an equitable society, while vocational awe is used to police library workers who fail to adequately live up to that neutrality-oriented standard of service.[18] Conceptions of neutrality in library work, like objectivity in research practices and merit in review and promotion practices, fail to acknowledge the normative position from which neutral, objective, and meritorious is a white, Western, middle-class, cis-gendered, heterosexual, Christian, male positionality. In library leadership and management discourse, the exclusion of critical perspectives results in the exclusion of systemic analyses and therefore perpetuates narratives of individual achievement or failure. Rarely do mainstream library leadership and management journals publish work that theorizes reshaping institutions and fundamentally remaking practices and policies.

# THE MISSING CRITICAL FEMINIST LENS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARY LEADERSHIP LITERATURE

Scholarship that applies critical feminist frameworks to library work has mostly been published outside of mainstream LIS publications, for instance in themed issues of *Library Trends*, open-access journals that specifically value critical perspectives such as, *In the Library with the Lead Pipe, Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, and *up/root*, and in books, in particular from Litwin Books & Library Juice Press. An historical adherence to positivist empirical studies in LIS, associated with quantitative, scientific methods and the concomitant belief that library work must be neutral and objective reflects anxiety about whether librarianship is a profession,[19] especially so in the library leadership and management literature. From early on in the profession's U.S. history, the men invested in the development of librarianship as a profession, such as Melvil Dewey, strenuously worked to advance library science as a *true* science. However, the neutral positioning of libraries inhibits advocacy for libraries, for library workers, and for the communities they serve.[20] Applying a critical feminist framework to leadership and management in academic libraries would eschew neutrality as a framing discourse in order to more assiduously address inequities and injustice built into our systems.

## METHODS

To capture how and whether feminist research methods have been applied to academic library leadership literature, I searched two key journals with library leadership and management as core to their scope. The review sought to document the frequency of published articles that made use of gendered, raced, and classed analyses in relation to leadership or management. The two journals, *Journal of Library Administration* and *Library Leadership & Management*, both have a U.S.-centric perspective. The following keyword and keyword phrases were used to search article-level content in each journal: *gender OR wom?n, feminist OR feminism OR feminist theory, race OR racial OR ethnicity, "working class" OR low-income OR socioeconomic,* and *intersectionality*. Included in the review are articles dating from 2000 to 2022 in *Journal of Library Administration* and from 2010 to 2022 in *Library Leadership & Management*. Only peer reviewed articles were included, excluded were columns and features.

## FINDINGS

Neither *intersectionality* nor *"working class" OR low-income OR socioeconomic* were fruitful search terms. The several articles retrieved did not specifically or substantively engage library administration, leadership, and management. Only two articles substantively addressed the intersection of management and gender or racial and ethnic diversity and gender in *Library Leadership & Management*. Hosoi, Evans, and Kirkpatrick reviewed *Harvard Business Review* and *MIT Sloan Management Review* for practitioner literature that prescribed methods for managers to create and support racial and ethnic, and also gender diversity in workplaces. Their review resulted in a division of recommendations in the literature for organizations, for individual managers, and for individuals from marginalized groups. They found potential applications for large academic libraries related to mentoring, evaluation of diversity initiatives, audits for processes and procedures, and enabling opportunities for growth and advancement.[21] These were a mix of recommendations wherein the burden falls with individual initiative and systemic change (e.g., auditing processes and procedures). Brown and Yaukey employed an exploratory, qualitative survey to learn more about perceptions of work-life balance of women library professionals with children, and concluded that libraries as workplaces provide no better working conditions for working mothers than U.S. workplaces in general. Their recommendations call for systemic changes in order to provide sufficient accommodations for working parents.[22]

Of the articles that specifically addressed gender and library leadership in the *Journal of Library Administration*, two explicitly applied feminist theories. Turock suggested an intersectional approach by recognizing that the yet to be achieved attainment of just and equitable distribution of leadership in libraries is not only a gendered issue but a "nonmajority" women's issue.[23] And Neigel critiqued the adoption of masculinized practices

in library leadership and recommended application of critical feminist theory in order to reveal the ways social structures and power relations operate in a female-intensive field and in LIS programs.[24] A handful of articles analyzed gender-coded language in instructional librarian and library management job advertisements[25] and gendered themes in library technology publications.[26] And Bladek found that gender parity had not yet been achieved in library leadership roles.[27]

Only two articles specifically addressed the intersection of those from minoritized racial and ethnic groups in leadership roles in the *Journal of Library Administration*. Alire described the "two-pronged leadership" style of minority leaders, a kind of double-consciousness of operating within white structures under increased scrutiny, while also breaking down stereotypes and valuing the specific leadership knowledge and skills that come from the lived experience of those from marginalized communities.[28] Hosoi's systemic review of the research related to the underrepresentation of Asian and Asian Americans in leadership roles in U.S. academic libraries, and higher education in general, found that research has focused on individuals rather than on the systemic production of inequities through practices, processes, and structures.[29]

More prevalent in the *Journal of Library Administration* were articles that explored the experiences of those from marginalized communities in the profession more broadly or as groups libraries serve. Through a survey of librarians' job satisfaction, Thornton concluded that African American women in librarianship find the least satisfaction in their jobs due to experiences of isolation, racial discrimination, and the realization that diversity programs to encourage entrance into the profession are "merely 'window dressing.'"[30] Whereas nearly a decade later, Martin's job satisfaction survey of library workers suggested no difference in job satisfaction between African American and white librarians and library staff. However, Martin's results suggested job satisfaction was highly correlative to work culture and environment, colleagues, and leadership. Job satisfaction surveys lack a granular view of intersectional factors, such as how race and racism, age and ageism, and status and classism impact work culture, a sense of belonging, and therefore job satisfaction.[31] In another survey-based research article, Alabi queried librarians on experiencing and witnessing racial microaggression in the workplace. Alabi found that those who work in libraries are as capable of perpetuating racial biases at both the individual and institutional levels and noted that "the overwhelming Whiteness of librarianship can serve as an environmental microaggression, signaling to people of color that their presence is neither wanted nor welcomed in the profession."[32] In a study of the impact of increasingly excessive workloads in special collections public services librarianship, Warren and Scoulas identified the capacity to engage in substantive equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives as significantly curtailed by excessive workloads and inadequate staffing.[33] Through interview-based research with library workers, Bresnahan explored the success of implementing equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives as defined in strategic plans, mission and vision statements. Bresnahan concluded that successful implementation will require library leaders who advocate and hold organizations accountable, EDI built into organizational structure and job descriptions, and investment of resources.[34] Caragher and Bryant concur that library leaders are responsible for investing resources, revising policy, and holding the organization accountable for creating pathways for success in hiring, retention, and promotion of Black library employees.[35]

In the past few years, the number of articles making use of critical research methods from gendered, raced, and classed perspectives published in mainstream LIS management journals such as *Journal of Library Administration* and *Library Leadership & Management* has grown. The articles published in these two journals that have addressed race and ethnicity were more likely to examine and suggest interventions at the structural and institutional level than those primarily focused on gender, which often move little beyond an argument for parity that tends to center individuals rather than systems and institutions. Representation matters yet is not sufficient. Library administrators must also hold themselves and others accountable for institutional change in relation to equitable and just practices.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES MATTER

> "At the root of feminist inquiry is attention to power and *how* knowledge is built…Knowledge is produced and mediated through lived experience."[36]

A practice of feminist leadership requires ongoing engagement in critical analyses, research, and theorizing. The purpose of critical theories is to lead to social change through informed practice: theory + practice = praxis. Patricia Hill Collins has asserted that "social change is a cyclical process…whereby what was once new has become old, and what once seemed old has become new again."[37] Furthermore, Collins regards our current historical moment as a time of "contentious change"[38] wherein we are in intense struggles for human rights that give us a "sense that 'we've been here before,' but it all feels different."[39] At its best, feminism, as with other critical social theories like intersectionality and queer theory, is a resistance knowledge project that enables us to bring about change, to transform power relations, and realize more just social relations.[40] In order for feminism as a resistance knowledge project to bring about changes in power relations and provide the conditions for more just social relations one must practice "critical vigilance."[41] This "critical vigilance" is overdue LIS management scholarship in this moment of "contentious change."

In order to practice "critical vigilance," we need research and practice in library administration that recognizes that representation matters but is not sufficient; that group identification is powerful and useful in transforming power relations but may also limit transformative potential when viewed as a totalizing theory of resistance; that we need to continually engage in "dialogues across differences of power…because such dialogues illuminate partial perspectives;"[42] and that white women in librarianship, especially in leadership and management roles, need to learn to "listen receptively and to "practice contraction."[43] Aiming for parity for women in leadership roles in academic libraries is necessary, yet parity may not lead to more equitable, just, and anti-oppressive organizations. Women in those leadership roles must be dedicated to resisting oppressive practices, and actively seek transformation in their organizations. Collective identification as a means to resist and to obtain power is necessary for transforming our organizations only when we seek coalition across differences among those who experience marginalization within institutions. And coalition across differences may be possible when white women relinquish unearned power that whiteness affords.

Feminism, aligned with intersectionality, as leadership practice and resistance knowledge project has the potential to provide frameworks for insisting on the value of the work we do within higher education institutions, to resist the pushes and pulls of maintaining current heteropatriarchal, white supremacist structures and systems, to acknowledge that claiming neutral positionality is absurd considering the relations of power within academic libraries, higher education, and broader operations of society, and to redefine leadership. The mainstream conceptualization of leadership in academic libraries needs dismantling and rebuilding through ongoing critical intersectional feminist theorizing and practice.

# NOTES

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