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Librarians’ Views on Critical Theories and Critical Practices

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ROBERT SCHROEDER AND CHRISTOPHER V. HOLLISTER

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Robert Schroeder and Christopher V. Hollister
Librarians’ Views on Critical Theories and Critical Practices

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This study was conducted to investigate levels of familiarity that librarians have with critical theory, to determine the extent to which it informs professional practices, and to examine how the social justice issues related to critical theory inform the practices of librarians who are unfamiliar with it. A survey found that librarians were versed not only in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, but also in poststructuralism, feminism, queer theory, critical race theory, and postcolonialism. Many librarians, lacking familiarity with critical theory, were also shown to be concerned with social justice and these issues significantly affect these librarians’ professional practices. Based on these results, the authors propose the plausibility of incorporating more critical theory into library and information science programs.

KEYWORDS critical theory, critical practice, social justice, professional practice, critical theorists

INTRODUCTION

The term critical theory is most closely associated with the Institute for Social Research, established at the University of Frankfurt am Main in the 1920s. This institute, which became known as the Frankfurt School, included social theorists such as Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, and later Jurgen Habermas (Leckie and Buschman 2010, viii). These academics applied Marxist theory to the social problems of their time, such as “the rise of fascism, mass consumer culture, and the states’
desire to circumscribe intellectual inquiry and critical dissent by the masses through science and technology” (Porfilio 2009, par. 2). Various French theorists joined the critical theory camp, or at least appeared to be allied with it in the eyes of many scholars: critics such as Roland Barthes, Henry Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Pierre Bourdieu (Leckie and Buschman 2010, viii). In the latter part of the 20th century other theories arose that became entwined with critical theory—feminist theory, critical pedagogy, queer theory, critical race theory, and postcolonialism, to name a few.

Critical theories are all unique. Many move away from solely looking at the human condition through the Frankfurt School’s Marxist perspectives of economics and class to using lenses of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. Such theories are also employed to varying degrees in different disciplines in the halls of academe. As the 20th century unfolded, many Western political and social institutions, including universities, began to include in their ranks larger numbers of women, minorities, and people of color. The formerly unquestioned and opaque assumptions at the root of these institutions began to be questioned by people outside the traditionally privileged classes, and those bases of privilege came under more and more scrutiny, analysis, and critique. Many would rightly say that critical theories and theorists share less than they have in common, but some strong threads of commonality are also apparent. To paraphrase Lisa Zanetti (2007) in her discussion of contemporary critical theory, they all look for understanding in “the lived experience of real people in context,” and they try “to understand the ways in which various social groups are oppressed.” Furthermore, the knowledge gained through the examinations of social conditions and hidden structures is seen as empowering for the oppressed, and the knowledge gained from these critical investigations is meant to be used in the transformation of society (Zanetti 2007, par. 13). All of these theories question status quos in Western thought, culture, or society. Adherents of critical theories, as they are termed by the authors of this article, ask questions such as, “Who or what is heard? Who or what is silenced? Who is privileged? Who is disqualified? How are forms of inclusion and exclusion being created? How are power relations constructed and managed?” (Cannella 2010, par. 7).

Critical theories have become part of the fabric of many disciplines, including “education, literary studies, philosophy, management, communication/media studies, international relations, political science, geography, language studies, sociology, and psychology, to name a few” (Leckie and Buschman 2010, ix). Critical theories are also becoming part of the discourse in library literature, as searches in library science databases will reveal. But what exactly do librarians mean when they speak of critical theory? Is it only in reference to the Frankfurt School or to one of the other critical theories already mentioned? Librarians all have an undergraduate degree outside of library and information science (LIS), and many have one or more non-LIS
graduate degrees. They may have learned about critical theory in any of these numerous disciplines, so there may be many conceptions of it in the library world. Perhaps even more importantly, librarians may be engaged in critical practices to different degrees and in varied ways. What do librarians do when they engage in critical practice? And finally, what about the librarians who have never heard of critical theory? Librarianship has a strong ethos of “user-centeredness,” and librarians have long recognized how inequities in society have hindered different groups’ access to information and technology. Might even those librarians who are not cognizant of critical theories actually be engaged in critical practices when they address issues of social justice? These, then, are the questions the authors of this article address.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Librarianship and Critical Theory

Although critical theory began in Germany in the 1920s, it was not until the 1970s that it made any substantial inroads in the United States, and it was at this time that it entered into the LIS field (Antonio 1983, 325). In 1972, Michael Harris published The Purpose of the American Public Library in Historical Perspective: A Revisionist Interpretation, in which he reassessed the romanticized history of the American public library, exposing its basic authoritarianism and elitism. Later, Wiegand (2000) noted Harris’s contribution to library history, and advocated for a broader critical approach to the profession. Harris (1986a; 1986b) followed his aforementioned work with two articles in which he began to critique librarians’ mostly unarticulated positivist and pluralistic outlook, and he called for a critical and reflective/empirical approach to librarianship.

By the 1990s and 2000s, more librarians began to take a critical approach to their profession. Pawley (1998), Budd (2003), Benoit (2002; 2007), and Pyati (2006) variously used the theories of Gramsci, Bourdieu, Habermas, and Marcuse as critical lenses through which to question the curricula of LIS programs. Following on these works, Leckie, Given, and Buschman (2010) edited a volume in which contributors explored ways that critical theorists’ ideas could readily be infused into LIS curricula, research, and practice. Many of the theorists represented in this work are from the Frankfurt School, but many others, like Bourdieu, Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, and de Saussure, are representative of other critical schools.

Most areas of the library and librarianship have since been examined using a variety of critical theories. In 1993, Buschman published Critical Approaches to Information Technology in Librarianship: Foundations and Applications, in which he used critical theory to examine the use of information technology in libraries; this influential work was updated and then
republished in 2009 (Leckie and Buschman 2009). In the early 2000s, a number of prominent LIS authors explored the theory of critical information literacy—most notably Troy Swanson (2004), James Elmborg (2006), and Heidi Jacobs (2008). In the area of pedagogy, Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier (2010) edited the seminal work *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*. Finally, the areas of cataloging and classification were also analyzed critically (Olson 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Olson and Schlegl 1999; 2001).

Critical Practice

The authors of this article are defining critical practice as the application of a critical theory to one’s professional life, or to one’s societal environment. For librarians, this would involve the application of a critical theory to their own professional life as a librarian in a specific library, or to libraries or librarianship in general. Critical theory has played a part in LIS for the past 40 years, but what about critical practices? In a larger perspective one might ask, does critical theory, as discussed by members of the Frankfurt School, say anything about critical practices? Finding itself researching sociological topics, with a Marxist lens, in pre-war Germany, the original Frankfurt group was extremely pessimistic about specific political application of their theories, and as Simone Chambers (2004) relates, “Critical Theory was born in the conviction that social theory should embrace normative, and pursue moral, ends. Thus for every evaluation of an ‘is,’ Critical Theory suggests an ‘ought.’” What Critical Theory has not always been good at is suggesting how we get from the ‘is’ to the ‘ought’” (219).

Since the 1930s critical theory has evolved and other, related, theories have emerged: feminist theory, queer theory, postcolonialism, and critical race theory, to name a few. Many of the theorists in these camps advocate for the application of critical theories to societal issues and to politics. Within the discipline of education, for example, scholars such as Stephen Brookfield, Henry Giroux, and Paolo Freire have not only theorized in critical terms, but they have demonstrated how critical theory can inform educational practice (Brookfield 2005; Freire 2000; Giroux 2001). As academic libraries are embedded in institutions of higher learning, the librarians in them can benefit and learn from these critical educational theorists. As Ryan Gage (2004) notes:

The value in examining the texts of critical theorists like Giroux is centered around the belief that a richer, more nuanced and multi-perspective means of reading the complexity and dynamic nature of society and library work is necessary not only for the purpose of extending knowledge but to then mobilize and transform theory from its abstract and institutional life into concrete ways of everyday practice and being. (73)
Freire’s (2000) *praxis* extends, in radical and novel ways, the concept of critical practice. He defines praxis most basically as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (51). Freire’s is perhaps an extreme example of the application of critical theory, but in some ways it may also be the most developed, in that he ties together theory, practice, and reflection.

As McLaren et al. (2010) state:

> Praxis is the union of action and reflection and of theory and practice. Paulo Freire refers to praxis as the reassertion of human action for a more humane world on two levels, the individual and social, where the simultaneous changing of circumstances and self-change occur. Critical praxis is threefold and includes self-reflection, reflective action, and collective reflective action. (par. 1)

Not all librarians who have been exposed to critical theory are necessarily involved in critical practices, certainly not to the extent envisioned by Freirean praxis. At the most basic level, for an academic librarian, a critical practice might be in choosing to base her or his scholarship (i.e., research, writing, and presentations) upon aspects of critical theory. Librarians cited in this literature review, along with many others, have chosen this method of critical practice. An obvious example of a critical practice in public services librarianship would be the use of critical pedagogies in library information literacy programs and classes. For instance, the text *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (Accardi et al. 2009) includes many examples of the application of critical theory to library instruction. Maria Accardi’s new publication, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (2013), also provides examples of applying feminist content and feminist models to library instruction. Another obvious example of critical practices is the application of critical concepts to cataloging. Sanford Berman, then cataloger at the Hennepin County Library, began this trend in the 1970s, and others such as K. R. Roberto continue exploring critical cataloging with works such as *Radical Cataloging: Essays from the Front* (Berman 1971; 1981; 2013; Roberto and Berman 2003).

**Social Justice**

Social justice is a highly contested concept, but at its most basic understanding, it can be seen as “a normative concept concerning the ways in which resources and power should be shared across society” (Ross and Rosati 2006, 437). While many traditional critical theorists have investigated power relations among various groups in society, few would prescribe specific actions that individuals should take in order to rebalance resources and power. Many schools of thought that are seen to be allied with critical theories, such as the
poststructuralists and postmodernists, would also take issue with the concept of social justice, especially in its appeal to be a grand narrative—that is, one with universal appeal over all times and cultures. However, some members of critical camps do see social justice actions as possibilities, or even as desired outcomes of critical inquiry. As Ross and Rosati (2006) explain:

Poststructuralist approaches, which many feminists have incorporated into their work, have criticized the apparent claims to universalism that mark many libertarian, liberal, and Marxist conceptions of social justice. They maintain that no universally shared meaning of social justice does, or can, effectively exist. They also argue that the bases on which conceptions of social justice have been measured place far too much emphasis on class or economic interests than on other forms of social well-being. This is not to say that poststructuralists necessarily wish to do away with ideas of social justice. Viable conceptions of social justice could exist so long as they incorporate mechanisms to recognize and dismantle the everyday power inequities related to differences in gender, race, ability, and sexuality in addition to those associated with class. (438)

The idea of social justice then, within the confines of this article, is defined as a concept concerning the ways in which resources and power should be shared across society, taking into consideration not only social class, but also inequities related to gender, race, ability, and sexuality.

Librarianship as a profession has long been concerned with issues of social justice, as related in the American Library Association’s (ALA) *Core Values of Librarianship* (2004). This document provides guidelines that exhort librarians to advocate for democracy, diversity, lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, and the public good. These guidelines also include the following commitment to social responsibility:

ALA recognizes its broad social responsibilities. The broad social responsibilities of the American Library Association are defined in terms of the contribution that librarianship can make in ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society; support for efforts to help inform and educate the people of the United States on these problems and to encourage them to examine the many views on and the facts regarding each problem; and the willingness of ALA to take a position on current critical issues with the relationship to libraries and library service set forth in the position statement. (par. 14)

All of the issues outlined in this core values statement—the role of the library in a democracy; diversity within the library profession and service to diverse or marginalized groups; intellectual freedom; equity in technology and the digital divide—have scores of articles devoted to them. As early as 1989, in the book *Social Responsibility in Librarianship: Essays on Equality*, librari-
ans discussed illiteracy, library resources, and library programs through the lens of race or from a feminist perspective (McCann 1989). More recently, in *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*, the authors (Gregory and Higgins 2013) show librarians and students moving beyond neo-liberalism, challenging authority, co-learning together, and engaging with the community for social change. Librarians responding to and embedding themselves in social movements around the world are also highlighted in the new work *Informed Agitation; Library and information Skills in social Justice Movements and Beyond* (Morrone 2014). The existence of both the ALA’s Social Responsibility Round Table and the Progressive Librarians Guild, along with the promulgation of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Diversity Standards: Cultural Competencies for Academic Libraries* in 2012, provide additional evidence of a strong thread of social justice within the library world. As Leckie, Given, and Buschman (2010) note, critical theory and a socially responsible library profession are natural partners; they state:

LIS is also very interested in the betterment of society, from the development of national information policies, to the provision of user-friendly and equitable access to information, the inclusion of diverse and/or marginalized clienteles, the support of citizen lifelong learning, the nurturing of the library in the community, and many other proactive areas of research and practice. Critical theorists give us an array of perspectives or approaches to the very concerns that we have in LIS and help us to think about/examine those issues in new ways. (xiii)

**METHOD**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the levels of familiarity that librarians have with critical theory and, furthermore, to determine the extent to which critical theory informs library practice. The authors were particularly interested in the levels of familiarity and the relative practices of front-line librarians—namely, the range of those professionals whose work has the most immediate impact on library users in person or online. For this reason, the authors wished to solicit input from public services personnel (i.e., reference, instruction, subject selectors, and liaisons), from technical services personnel whose work has the most immediate impact on online users (i.e., acquisitions, cataloging, and electronic resources), and from library computing personnel whose work also has the most immediate impact on online users (i.e., systems and Web development).

The authors’ hypothesis included the assumption that library practitioners have varying levels of familiarity with critical theory. For this reason,
the authors needed to fashion a dual method of soliciting relevant input from librarians who are very or somewhat familiar with critical theory, and from those who know nothing of it. This need for a dual method of data collection led the authors to develop a survey instrument that separated the two groups of respondents and directed them to separate sets of questions.

The nature of the survey’s subject matter required the use of open-ended and closed-ended questions for both groups of respondents, and accordingly, the authors needed a way of capturing, organizing, and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative results. For this reason, and also for the purpose of distributing the survey electronically, the authors adapted it to the Qualtrics\(^1\) online survey platform (see appendix).

The first two questions of the survey were the same for both groups. For Question 1, respondents were asked to specify what general area of librarianship best describes their professional responsibilities: public services, technical services, or systems. For Question 2, respondents were asked to indicate their level of familiarity with critical theory: very familiar or somewhat familiar (Group A), or no familiarity (Group B). The respondents’ answers to Question 2 led them to one of two separate sets of subsequent questions that were deemed by the authors to be appropriate for indicated levels of critical theory familiarity. The questions specified for Group A were designed for the following main purposes: to reveal the academic backgrounds of librarians who self-identify as being very familiar or somewhat familiar critical theory; to assess their depth of critical theory sophistication; to show how specific elements of critical theory inform their professional practices; and to gauge how they project the possible applications of critical theory and its major tenets to professional practice. The questions specified for Group B were designed for the following main purposes: to learn whether these librarians engaged in social justice activities as part of their normal job responsibilities; to see what these social justice practices might be; and to discover whether these practices differed in any substantial ways from the critical practices of Group A.

To solicit input from the desired range of librarians, the authors distributed the survey to five professional discussion lists. Each list was vetted and ultimately chosen for the purpose of generating input from deep pools of professionals in each of the targeted areas of academic librarianship. The LibRef\(^2\) list was selected to target reference librarians, subject selectors, and liaisons; the Information Literacy Instruction (ILI-L)\(^3\) list was chosen to engage the community of instruction librarians; the Electronic Resources in

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\(^1\) Information on Qualtrics Online Survey Software is available at https://www.qualtrics.com. [Author’s institution] was licensed to use the program at the time of this study.

\(^2\) The LibRef-L list is available at https://listserv.kent.edu/cgi-bin/wa.exe?A0=LIBREF-L

\(^3\) The Information Literacy Instruction (ILI-L) list is available at http://lists.ala.org/wws/info/ili-l
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Libraries (ERIL)\(^4\) list was picked to generate input from electronic resources librarians and the wide range of related and overlapping public, systems, and technical services personnel; the Autocat\(^5\) list was selected to involve catalogers, acquisitions librarians, and other technical services personnel; and finally, the Web4Lib\(^6\) list was chosen to elicit input from library systems and Web development people.

The survey was distributed simultaneously to the five selected discussion lists, inviting those who knew about critical theories as well as those who knew nothing of critical theories to respond. Prospective respondents were given a 2-week window in which to complete the survey. The survey used in this study was based on convenience sampling, and for that reason the results are not generalizable. Only librarians from the discussion lists just noted who felt inclined to complete a survey on critical theories in libraries would have taken the time to do so. As the authors were more interested in the breadth of thought about critical theories among librarians and the range of professional activities that librarians believe to be critical practices, a nonrandom sampling was deemed to be sufficient.

RESULTS

Questions 1 and 2: All Respondents

The survey garnered 369 responses in total. As the survey bifurcated after Question 2—*To what extent are you familiar with a critical theory?*—two groups were formed: Group A and Group B. Subsequent questions for each of the two study groups are henceforth referred to by the group designation and the question number (e.g., A1, A2, B1, B2, etc.). As none of the survey questions required a response, the individual questions ultimately received between 49 and 365 total responses.

More than half of the respondents (52 percent) categorized themselves as working in public services; roughly one-third (31 percent) in technical services; 9 percent in systems; and 8 percent in other. As the authors desired to solicit responses from a variety of areas within libraries, the representation seemed appropriate. Roughly two-thirds of the respondents reported that they had some understanding of a critical theory; they became Group A. Within Group A only 12 percent reported being “very familiar” with a critical theory; 29 percent were “somewhat familiar”; and 26 percent had a “passing familiarity.” The remaining one-third who had no familiarity with critical theory became our Group B, and each group was directed to a different set

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\(^4\) The Electronic Resources in Libraries (ERIL) list is available at http://listserv.binghamton.edu/scripts/wa.exe?A0=eril-l

\(^5\) The Autocat list is available at https://listserv.syr.edu/scripts/wa.exe?A0=AUTOCAT

\(^6\) The Web4Lib list is available at http://web4lib.org.
of questions. The authors were pleased to receive such a large response from librarians unfamiliar with critical theory. About half of the technical services and systems librarians were part of Group B, while less than one-quarter of public librarians were in this group. This resulted in Group A’s composition being more highly skewed toward public services librarians.

Questions for Group A: Respondents Familiar with Critical Theory

Question A1: How did you learn about critical theory? Question A1 generated a total of 220 answers from 184 respondents; multiple answers were allowed. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of Group A learned about critical theory while in college; equal numbers were indicated for undergraduate and graduate studies. One-quarter of responses were coded as “learned independently,” and by far the vast majority of responders in this category stated that personal reading was how they learned of critical theory. Only 4 percent of respondents learned about critical theory via professional development opportunities: mostly by attending conferences. Interestingly, 4 percent also reported other “informal” means of becoming exposed to critical theory: from talking with graduate students or faculty; by assisting students with research; and by the simple fact of being women of color.

Question A2: What were your undergraduate and graduate majors in college? More than one-half (57 percent) of the respondents to Question A2 reported a college major in the humanities; more than one-third (36 percent) were in the social sciences; and only 7 percent reported a major in the sciences. One hundred and six respondents who indicated college as the place they learned about critical theory also reported their majors, so the authors were able to surmise the disciplines in which they encountered critical theories. Ignoring LIS for the moment, the largest percentages were from English/literature (29 percent) and history (13 percent). This comes as no surprise, as it is reflective of the large numbers of these graduates in the library profession (Cain 1988). Seven other disciplines filled out the remaining 38 percent: education (8 percent); philosophy (7 percent); art history (6 percent); communications (6 percent); film studies (5 percent); general humanities (4 percent); and sociology (4 percent). This, too, is not surprising, as critical theories have been applied robustly in each of these fields for decades. Library science was reported by 14 percent of the respondents as the discipline in which they first encountered a critical theory. Although this is a comparatively large percent of the answers given to this question, LIS is the one major that all of the respondents shared. From this perspective, 14 percent seems remarkably low, and the relatively weak association of LIS and critical theory was corroborated by the next question.
Question A3: To what extent did your library school experience inform your ideas of critical theory? Only 6 percent of the respondents to this question reported that their library school experience informed their ideas of critical theory to a great extent; 12 percent indicated that library school informed their ideas to some extent. Conversely, 32 percent reported very little exposure or influence, and 50 percent of the respondents reported that library school did not inform their ideas of critical theory at all.

Question A4: To what extent does critical theory play a role in your professional life as a librarian? Of the 145 respondents to this question, 79 percent indicated that critical theory plays a role in their professional lives to some extent; 21 percent to a great extent; 33 percent only somewhat; and 25 percent a little. The remaining 21 percent indicated that critical theory plays no role in their professional lives.

Question A5: Give an example or two of how you have applied a critical theory concept to your practice as a librarian. Question A5 generated a total of 155 answers from 102 respondents. All answers given for this question were placed into one of three broad categories—functional, holistic, or skeptical—and then subdivided for closer scrutiny. It is important to note, however, that some respondents provided multiple answers that were placed into separate categories or into separate areas of the same categories. Answers labeled as functional were those given by respondents who have applied critical theory or tenets thereof to specific areas of their professional practice (e.g., cataloging, reference, etc.). Answers labeled as holistic were those given by respondents who have applied critical theory or tenets thereof to inform their broader perspectives on librarianship, libraries, and library users. Answers labeled as skeptical were those given by respondents who have not or would not apply critical theory or tenets thereof to areas of their professional practice. Answers indicating that respondents were uncertain about the applications of critical theory to professional practice were also placed in skeptical category. Sixty-five percent of the answers given for Question A5 were functional in nature, 28 percent were holistic, and 7 percent were skeptical.

Functional answers were led by librarians who have applied elements of critical theory to instruction (38 percent), cataloging (15 percent), reference (13 percent), and collection development (13 percent). Given that 52 percent of the survey respondents reported themselves as working in public services, it was not surprising to find greater percentages of respondents who have applied elements of critical theory to those relative professional practices. Still, numerous overlapping answers were given, as exemplified by this response:

I use a critical framework when devising human rights-based information literacy instruction, especially for evaluating WWW resources. I use
Interestingly, 7 percent of the answers given in the functional category showed that survey respondents applied critical theory to their professional research and writing. The authors included these answers in the functional category because the respondents were predominantly academic librarians, and because a recent study showed that 87 percent of academic libraries either require or encourage their librarians to publish in scholarly journals (Best and Kneip 2010). Other functional areas were represented to lesser degrees: administration (3 percent), systems (3 percent), access services (2 percent), and subject specialist/departmental liaison (2 percent).

Holistic answers were led by librarians who have applied elements of critical theory to inform their broader perspectives on students/library users (26 percent), the role of libraries (12 percent), the nature of librarianship (4 percent), and the role of educational institutions (2 percent). Skeptical answers included librarians who have not or would not apply elements of critical theory to their professional practices (9 percent), and those who were uncertain of the applications (1 percent).

Question A6: Hypothetically, what other ways might you consider applying critical theory to your practice as a librarian? Question A6 generated a total of 139 answers from 91 respondents. As with Question A5, all answers given for this question were placed into one of three categories—functional, holistic, or skeptical—and some respondents provided multiple answers that were placed into separate categories or into separate areas of the same categories. The same operational definitions apply for each category. Sixty-two percent of the answers given for Question A6 were functional in nature, 24 percent were holistic, and 14 percent were skeptical. Although the percentages of answers attributed to each category were similar to those for Question A6, the breakdown within each category was notably different.

Functional answers were led by librarians who might consider applying elements of critical theory to instruction (19 percent), professional research and writing (13 percent), reference (12 percent), collection development (12 percent), cataloging (10 percent), access services (10 percent), and subject specialist/departmental liaison (10 percent). A comparison of these functional answers to those given for Question A5—librarians who have applied critical theory to professional practice—shows a significant decrease in the hypothetical application to instruction, and notable increases in the areas of professional research and writing, subject specialist/departmental liaison, and access services. Interestingly, 7 percent of the respondents to this question indicated that they might consider applying elements of critical theory to all functional areas of their professional practice. To maintain the integrity of the survey results, the authors created a separate subcategory for “all functional areas,” as opposed to adding to the separate percentages for...
each subcategory. Other functional areas were represented to lesser degrees: administration (5 percent) and systems (2 percent).

Holistic answers were led by librarians who might consider applying elements of critical theory to inform their broader perspectives on students/library users (12 percent), the role of libraries (10 percent), the nature of librarianship (9 percent), and the role of educational institutions (2 percent). A comparison of these holistic answers to those given for Question A5 showed a significant decrease in the hypothetical application of critical theory to inform respondents' broader perspectives on students/library users, and a somewhat notable increase in the hypothetical application to inform perspectives on the nature of librarianship. There was also a significant increase in the percentage of skeptical answers given to this question (20 percent), as compared to those given for Question A5. Skeptical answers were led by librarians who were uncertain of the hypothetical applications (11 percent), and those who have not or would not hypothetically apply elements of critical theory to their professional practices (9 percent).

**Question A7: Briefly, what might librarians do that would further the adoption of critical theory and the application of critical theory concepts to professional practice?** Question A7 generated a total of 154 answers from 88 respondents. As with Questions A5 and A6, all answers given for this question were placed into one of three categories—functional, holistic, or skeptical—and some respondents provided multiple answers that were placed into separate categories or into separate areas of the same categories. However, there is an important distinction to be made when comparing the results of Question A7 to those of Questions A5 and A6. Although the two previous questions related to librarians’ own professional experiences, this question asked respondents to speculate or suggest how all librarians might apply elements of critical theory to professional practice. For the purpose of comparing and contrasting the answers to Questions A5 through A7, this distinction generated noteworthy results. Seventy-one percent of the answers given for Question A7 were functional in nature, 22 percent were holistic, and 7 percent were skeptical. Although the percentages of answers attributed to each category were somewhat similar to those for Questions A5 and A6, the breakdown within each category was significantly different.

Functional answers were led by two subcategories that were not addressed by respondents in Questions A5 or A6: professional development (39 percent), and LIS curricula (24 percent). The authors included these answers in the functional category for the same general reason that they included professional research and writing: to wit, these subcategories are deemed to be functional elements of professional practice. Interestingly, 23 percent of the respondents to this question indicated that librarians might apply elements of critical theory to all functional areas of professional practice. As with the results to Question A6, the authors included a separate subcategory for “all functional areas,” as opposed to adding to the separate
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TABLE 1  Theorists Associated with “Critical Theory”

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<tr>
<th>Theorist</th>
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<td>Michel Foucault</td>
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<td>Karl Marx</td>
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<td>Paulo Freire</td>
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<td>Jacques Derrida</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>Jurgen Habermas,</td>
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<td>Teodor Adorno</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith Butler</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankfurt School</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roland Barthes</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bell hooks</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max Horkheimer</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Baudrillard</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

percentages for each subcategory. Other functional areas were represented to lesser degrees: professional research and writing (16 percent), instruction (11 percent), subject specialist/departmental liaison (9 percent), access services (3 percent), reference (1 percent), collection development (1 percent), administration (1 percent), and systems (1 percent).

Holistic answers were led by respondents who speculated or suggested that librarians might apply elements of critical theory to inform broader overall perspectives on the nature of librarianship (15 percent), the role of libraries (11 percent), students/library users (7 percent), and the role of educational institutions (1 percent). A comparison of these answers to those given for Questions A5 and A6 showed a significant decrease in the perceived holistic applications of critical theory to professional practice. Skeptical answers included 3 percent of respondents who speculated or suggested that librarians would not or should not apply elements of critical theory to professional practice, and 1 percent of respondents who were uncertain of the applications (1 percent).

Question A8: What keywords or theorists do you associate with critical theory? With this question the authors were looking to discover the critical theorists to which librarians most closely related, and also what range of theorists and schools that might be represented. Question A8 generated a total of 326 answers from 99 respondents; these answers consisted of 91 unique theorists. Twelve theorists accounted for 182 (almost 60 percent) of the responses, as shown in Table 1. Although the Frankfurt School is not a single theorist, it was included in this table because it was mentioned so frequently. Unsurprisingly, Karl Marx and the Frankfurt School (i.e., Habermas, Adorno, and Horkheimer) were ranked highly. Somewhat surprisingly, there was a significant representation from the group of theorists who are loosely identified by scholars as poststructuralists. These theorists—Foucault,
Derrida, Butler, and Baudrillard—are often linked with the Frankfurt School, especially in the area of critiques of power relations, but these schools are also seen as being at odds. As Phil Carspecken (2008) states, both critical theory and poststructuralism take issue with modernity, specifically with Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment concepts of knowledge, truth, and rationality. Critical theory bases its notion of critique on a paradigmatic shift in the concepts of universal reason, reflection, emancipation, and the human subject. In contrast, poststructuralism/postmodernism bases its notion of critique on the rejection of any universal features of these same concepts. Thus, although both perspectives are “critical,” they are fundamentally opposed when it comes to explaining the ultimate basis of critique. (par. 2)

Another way to examine the complete list of answers to Question A8—326 responses and 91 theorists—is by the disciplines or schools of thought with which the indicated theorists are associated. In the best of conditions, classification is a tricky and value-laden exercise; the categorization of these theorists is no exception, especially considering that it was their theories, in part, that helped to create the interdisciplinary, unhinged, and postmodern world we inhabit. Many of these theorists are considered to be at home in one discipline, but have influenced others. Many are situated at a confluence of disciplines: Is bell hooks, for instance, to be classed in education, feminist theory, or race theory? Many of the indicated theorists, especially those who are described as poststructuralists, vehemently oppose their inclusion in this group. These theorists are not being categorized here in order to argue for the authority of their classification, but rather, within the confines of our convenience sample, to broadly discover main schools of thought that are influencing librarians’ concept of what constitutes a critical theory.

Referring to Table 2, the broad range of theorists and disciplines represented is striking, but the corresponding broad range of respondents’ college majors provides a possible explanation for this. That the Frankfurt School, Karl Marx, and the poststructuralists should top the list comes as no surprise, due to their association with critical theory and postmodernism. It is also understandable that a large contingent of educators are represented, as their theories are touched upon in many academic curricula. Given that all respondents were librarians, it is somewhat surprising that relatively few of their responses named other librarians.

The answers to Question A8 are unique and noteworthy because the respondents—all librarians—listed significant numbers of theorists from other disciplines: semioticians/linguists; philosophers; sociologists; psychologists; and scholars of literature. It is hard to imagine another field besides librarianship where Chomsky, Barthes, Bourdieu, Lukacs, Maslow, Nietzsche,
TABLE 2 Theorists by Discipline/School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline/school</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>Number of theorists</th>
<th>Theorist name (listed alphabetically)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poststructuralism</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Baudrillard, Butler, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Lacan, Lyotard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankfurt School</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Adorno, Benjamin, Habermas, Horkheimer, Marcuse, “the Frankfurt School”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marxism</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Althusser, Badiou, Gramsci, Jameson, Luxemburg, Marx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiotics/linguistics</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Barthes, Chomsky, Guattari, Saussure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminism</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Cixous, de Beauvoir, Harraway, hooks, Paglia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Chatman, Day, Elmborg, Hjorland, Kapitzke, Kuhlthau, Olson, Pawley, Raber, Ranganathan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Gadamer, Hegel, Kant, Kuhn, Lefevbre, Mamfords, Nietzsche, Simmel, Wittgenstein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bourdieu, Latour, Weber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Alinsky, Appadurai, Arendt, Bookchin, Bryson, Moore, McClary, Wong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postcolonialism</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fannon, Said, Spivak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bandura, Dreyfus, Freud, Maslow, Zizek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bel, Eagleton, Lukacs, Sedgewick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical race theory</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bell, Crenshaw, Delgado, Davis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and Weber would appear on such a list. Representative scholars from art (Norman Bryson), music (Susan McClary and Deborah Wong), and religion (Stephen Moore) were also included in a “miscellaneous” category. Scholars who are associated with other critical theories rounded out the list: feminists, postcolonialists, and critical race theorists (Angela Davis, Edward Said, Derrick Bell, bell hooks, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak). The prominence of all these varieties of critical theories in the minds of the respondents is confirmed by the answers to Question A9.

Question A9: Which of the following terms do you associate with critical theory? Question A9 generated a total of 509 answers from 120 respondents, offering six different critical theoretical models from which to choose (see Figure 1). More than 70 percent of the respondents selected Marxist criticism, critical pedagogy, or feminist criticism, while more than 60 percent selected queer theory, critical race theory, or postcolonialism. Only 5 percent responded that they associate none of the choices with critical theory.
Questions for Group B: Respondents Not Familiar With Critical Theory

Questions B1 through B6 were administered to survey respondents who indicated that they were not familiar with critical theory. Of the 365 librarians who responded to the survey, one-third (122) fell into this category. Given that Group B consisted of librarians who were unfamiliar with critical theory, respondents were asked to answer questions that related to the underlying causes of the issues that critical theories and practices address—those being issues of social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability or disability, and power imbalances among groups in society. The authors hoped that these questions might reveal the extent to which the librarians in Group B might be recognizing and partially addressing the same societal issues as the librarians in Group A, although without the benefit of a critical theoretical perspective.

**Question B1: What were your undergraduate and graduate majors in college?**

The preponderance of respondents to Question B1 had earned non-library-science degrees in the humanities (44 percent) or in the social sciences (42 percent). The sciences were the least represented disciplinary group (14 percent). Still, this made the composition of Group B slightly more skewed toward the sciences and social sciences than Group A. Similar to Group A, the largest represented non-library-science majors were English/literature (21 percent) and history (12 percent). Only music (9 percent), foreign languages (6 percent), and psychology (5 percent) garnered over 5 percent of the remaining responses.
Question B2: Some issues in contemporary society relate to social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability or disability, and power imbalances between different groups. The following five questions relate to the intersection of these issues in libraries, librarians, or librarianship. Do you believe that any of the following issues affect libraries or librarianship? Choose as many as apply. Question B2 generated a total of 496 answers from 101 respondents (see Figure 2). More than 80 percent of the respondents indicated that both issues of social class and power imbalances between groups in society were affecting libraries or librarianship; more than 70 percent selected issues of ability or disability; more than 60 percent selected issues of race, ethnicity, and gender; and 50 percent selected sexual orientation. Only 6 percent responded that none of these issues affected libraries or librarianship.

Question B3: Can you give a brief example of how one or more of the issues listed above affect libraries or librarianship? Question B3 generated a total of 93 answers from 58 respondents. Answers given for this question were coded for one of seven categories—social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability or disability, and power imbalances. It is important to note, however, that some respondents provided multiple answers; each answer was added to its relevant category. Furthermore, more than one-quarter (27 percent) of the respondents provided holistic answers to this question, answers that defied classification into any of the categories just listed. Many comments were general in nature, as exemplified by this response: “All of these issues affect librarianship as we serve the public. These folks are all members of the public and therefore need to be considered in our mission as librarians.” Others respondents reflected on a specific
functional area of the library (e.g., reference, instruction, collection development, etc.), and their answers were focused on meeting patrons’ needs in those areas. Interestingly, there were also five comments that related library funding to all of the issues noted.

The social class category accounted for 20 percent of the answers to Question B3; access for lower class patrons was indicated as a very important issue, especially access to computers and to the Internet. Lower class patrons were described by respondents as having unique needs, such as job hunting and seeking social services. Patrons from lower classes were also described by respondents as unaware of what the library had to offer, and as lacking in the social capital around library use.

The ability/disability category accounted for 13 percent of the answers to Question B3. Most of these responses were related to disabled patron access, and major concerns were expressed regarding technology and computer use by disabled patrons. The issue of gender also garnered 13 percent of the responses. Interestingly, the majority of the gender-coded responses were related to library employees rather than library patrons. A chorus of comments echoed one librarian’s response: “Librarianship is a pink collar profession; low prestige and salary associated with women, men tend to dominate upper management positions.” Issues of ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and power imbalances in society each received less than 10 percent of the responses. Responses in these categories highlighted the role that education—or the lack thereof—plays in library use; the need to build collections appropriate for members of all these groups; the unique barriers in asking for assistance that are perceived by members of these groups; the lack of ethnic librarians and/or librarians of color; and the comparatively high representation of gays and lesbians in the library workforce.

Question B4: Do any of these issues inform your practice as a librarian in a substantive way? Choose as many as apply. The perspective for this question was shifted away from the profession of librarianship in general and focused more on each respondent’s particular critical practices. Question B4 asked respondents to indicate which of the issues from Question B2 informed their practices as librarians in a substantive way. As shown in Table 3, the issues were ranked in much the same order as the answers to Question B2; there were, however, a few notable differences. For instance, 101 librarians responded to Question B2 about issues affecting libraries in general, and only 79 responded to Question B4 about how those issues informed personal practices. This difference may be attributed to survey fatigue, but it might also indicate that fewer librarians relate these issues to their own work, as opposed to the profession at large. Two other data from this table support this supposition. First, between 50 percent and 84 percent of the respondents considered the various issues presented as relevant to the profession of librarianship, but only between 29 percent and 54 percent regarded them as applicable to their own practice; and second,
one-quarter of the respondents replied that none of the above factors informed their practices in a substantial way.

**Question B5: Can you give a brief example or two of how one or more of the issues listed above inform your practice as a librarian?** With Question B5, the authors continued to explore how social issues play out in librarians’ personal practices; they did this by asking respondents to provide examples. There were 59 answers given by 52 respondents; their replies were coded into the categories in Table 4.

A comparison of responses to Questions B3 and B5 shows that many of the categories have similar representation; those categories are holistic, social class, gender, ability/disability, ethnicity, and power imbalances. Responses dealt with most functional areas of the library, including collection development, reference, cataloging, and instruction. Ten percent of these answers were self-reflective, in that they mentioned how social issues affect librarians rather than patrons—issues of funding, hiring, and promotion.

Regarding this point, one librarian wrote the following:

### TABLE 3 Comparison of Responses to Questions B2 and B4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Question B2, issues that influence librarianship</th>
<th>Question B4, issues that influence personal practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power imbalances between groups in society</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability or disability</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above affect libraries or librarianship</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 4 How the Issues Inform Librarianship and Personal Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Question B3, issues affect librarianship</th>
<th>Question B5, issues inform personal practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General/holistic</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability/Disability</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power imbalances</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As an administrator, I try to create a climate where all users are comfortable and unthreatened. I support programs for staff to build an awareness of how we are often staff-centric instead of user-centric. I try to monitor electronic services so they are accessible to all and easy to use. I try to model behaviors that reach out to others who are unlike me.

Both the race and the sexual orientation categories yielded no responses when it came to issues of personal practice. It was also noteworthy that 15 percent of the respondents indicated that these social issues did not inform their personal practices at all.

Question B6: If librarians were to get more involved in the issues listed above as they affect the profession of librarianship, what are the most important actions they can take? Question B6 generated a total of 98 answers from 49 respondents. As with Questions A5—A7, all answers given for this question were placed into one of three categories—functional, holistic, or skeptical—and some respondents provided multiple answers that were placed into separate categories or into separate areas of the same categories.

Holistic answers to Question B6 were led by respondents who speculated or suggested that librarians might use their social justice concerns to inform broader overall perspectives on students/library users (41 percent), the nature of librarianship (37 percent), and the role of libraries (17 percent). Functional answers given to Question B6 were led by librarians who desired to improve access services (41 percent), instruction (20 percent), collection development (17 percent), and systems (10 percent).

DISCUSSION

It is useful to begin the discussion with brief demographic overviews of the two study groups. Group A—two-thirds of the respondents—had at least some familiarity with a critical theory. The members of this group represented numerous areas of the library, with more than one-half being public service librarians. The majority of Group A had college majors in the humanities, but there was also a good number of social science and a few science majors as well; the most common majors were English/literature and history. More than two-thirds of Group A learned about critical theory in college, with only 14 percent encountering it in a library science course. About one-quarter of Group A learned about critical theory independently, most often through their own personal reading.

Approximately one-third of the survey respondents knew nothing about critical theory; they became Group B. This group consisted of slightly more social science and science college majors, and it also included slightly more technical services and systems librarians than Group A. As with Group
A, however, Group B’s most common majors were English/literature and history.

Group A was asked the extent to which critical theory played a role in their professional lives (Question A4), but because Group B members had no knowledge of critical theory the same question could not be asked of them. However, the authors were interested in the extent to which these librarians, who knew nothing of critical theory, might be involved in many of the same social justice issues that critical theory addresses. As noted in the introduction, Cannella (2010) summarizes some of the lines of inquiry that many critical theorists pursue when they ask, “Who or what is heard? Who or what is silenced? Who is privileged? Who is disqualified? How are forms of inclusion and exclusion being created? How are power relations constructed and managed?” (par. 7). These questions of inclusion, privilege, and power in society are often conceptualized in terms of the groups who are excluded, underprivileged, and disempowered, with those groups being seen in terms of social class, disability, gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. For this reason, Questions B2 and B4 were framed in terms of these groups, and Group B participants were asked how they view the relationship of these groups to the library and to their professional practices. While the authors do not consider these two questions as being exactly equivalent, so that no point-by-point comparison can be made, the juxtaposition of the answers may be insightful.

In answer to question A4, 79 percent of the respondents in Group A indicated that critical theory played some role in their practice as a librarian. To a large extent Group B librarians indicated that issues affecting the social groups just listed play out in the library, with responses to the various social issues being between 50 percent and 84 percent (see Table 3). Group B participants also noted that these issues influenced their own personal practices as librarians to a lesser extent—between 29 percent and 54 percent on the various issues. It is interesting to note that about one-fifth of Group A respondents indicated that critical theory played no role in their practice, even though they knew something of it, and that one-quarter of Group B respondents noted that the social issues described played no role in their practices either.

Group B recognized various social issues affecting different groups of their patrons, and these issues seemed to be echoed by Group A. In response to Question A8, which asked participants to give critical theorists’ names, Group A respondents noted Marxists, poststructuralists, and members of the Frankfurt School who all are concerned with social class and power, but they also included feminist critics, queer theorists, and critical race theorists. Additionally, when participants were asked to identify terms that were associated with critical theory in Question A9, the categories of feminist criticism, queer theory, postcolonialism, and critical race theory all garnered more than a 61 percent response rate. This suggests that both
The authors were particularly interested in comparing the answers given for Questions A7 and B6, as these were the questions in which respondents from the groups were asked to speculate on how either critical theory (Group A) or social justice concerns (Group B) might be applied to the library profession in the future. This comparison yielded some intriguing results: Fifty-five percent of the answers given for Question B6 were holistic in nature, 47 percent were functional, and 3 percent were skeptical. Compared to Question A6, this represents a 33 percent increase in holistic answers, a 24 percent decrease in functional answers, and a modest 4 percent dip in skeptical responses. The authors attribute these larger differences to the fact that respondents from Group A, by way of their prior familiarity with critical theory, had more time than those in Group B to synthesize the relative implications in terms of daily, functional practices.

Interestingly, when the answers to Question B6 were compared to the answers given to Question A7, there was an increase in the percentages represented in each of these leading functional categories; this was especially notable in the area of access services. The functional areas of professional development and professional research and writing—both of which were well represented in the results for Question A6—received no mentions. For librarians in Group A, advancing critical theory through research and reflection appears to be a priority. For librarians in Group B, social justice actions and applications to the library as a whole appear to matter more.

CONCLUSION

As this study shows, many librarians are concerned with social justice issues as they relate to the library, and many of them act upon these issues in their professional practices. Some librarians have knowledge of critical theories and others do not. It is heartening that librarians, as a professional group, created and abide by the Core Values of Librarianship (ALA 2004) statement, which includes a commitment to social responsibility.

The majority of the librarians in this study who have no knowledge of critical theory regard service to historically underserved and underrepresented populations as an inherent part of their daily practices. Two-thirds of the study participants had some knowledge of a critical theory, and most of them view strong relationships of critical theory to librarianship and to their own practices. In fact, the richness of the theories and the theoreticians indicated was noteworthy, due in part to the characteristic interdisciplinary backgrounds of librarians. And these librarians indicated that if critical theory were to expand further into librarianship, more research, conference
presentations, and inclusion of critical theory in LIS curricula would be key elements. Critical theory and its related questions provide strong support and a structural framework for librarians’ involvement in social justice issues in relation to professional practices.

Since such a small percentage of the librarians surveyed were exposed to a critical theory in an LIS program (only 14 percent of the respondents to Question A2), the authors suggest that more of this subject matter should be included in LIS programs. From at least the early part of the 20th century, library science has been criticized as lacking in a theoretical foundation. As early as 1934 Periam Danton, in his article titled “Plea for a Philosophy of Librarianship,” mused that this lack of philosophical underpinnings may be a result of our profession being a pragmatic one that only focuses on practical problems, or perhaps a result of librarianship being a relatively new profession (Danton 1934, 532). Recent scholars continue to assert that this lack of a philosophical base questions the very existence of a discipline of library science, or at the very least lessens librarians’ effectiveness in addressing the current challenges to the profession (Budd 2001; Hjørland 2013, 2). Emily Ford, in her recent article, “What We Do and Why We Do It?” (2012), argued that librarians need to develop a philosophy of librarianship for more pragmatic reasons. Ford quoted Rory Litwan, from his introduction to his translation of Andre Cossette’s Humanism and Libraries: An Essay of the Philosophy of Librarianship, in saying:

Sound ideas about what librarianship is and what its goals are permit us to claim a degree of autonomy in institutions where we might otherwise serve as mere functionaries rather than as the professionals we are. Without a philosophical foundation, we lack a basis for making decisions regarding how to change our institutions in response to external forces, with the potential result that we do no play the role that we should in decision-making. (Litwan 2009, x)

The authors of this study suggest the possibility of exploring critical theories as a basis of LIS. As can be seen from the results in this study, many librarians come to LIS programs with some exposure to a critical theory. Many LIS authors cited in this article have begun to explore ways in which critical theories provide the library science with both a useful philosophical basis for the discipline, and a basis for librarians’ actions in furthering various causes of social justice. Further research in this area is warranted to address the following questions: What philosophies of librarianship are currently espoused by LIS programs? To what extent are critical theories included in LIS programs? Which type of critical theory (the Frankfurt School, feminism, queer theory, etc.) is used? In which functional areas of librarianship (instruction, cataloging, technology, etc.) are these theoretical applications found? These and many other questions await exploration.
LIBRARIANS’ VIEWS ON CRITICAL THEORIES AND PRACTICES

REFERENCES


APPENDIX—SURVEY QUESTIONS

[Questions for all respondents]

1. Which area of the library do you work in? Please choose the one response below that most closely matches.
   a. Technical Services (Acquisitions, cataloging, serials, etc.)
   b. Public Services (reference, instruction, circulation.)
   c. Systems (Computing, Web, etc.)

2. To what extent are you familiar with a critical theory? [Choose one]
   a. I am very familiar with a critical theory. [go to A Questions]
   b. I am somewhat familiar with a critical theory. [go to A Questions]
   c. I have a passing familiarity with a critical theory. [go to A Questions]
   d. I don’t know much of anything about any critical theory. [go to B Questions]
3. How did you learn about critical theory? [text box]

4. What were your undergraduate and graduate majors in college? [text box]

5. To what extent did your library school experience inform your ideas of critical theory? [choose one]
   a. Greatly
   b. To some extent
   c. A little
   d. Not at all

6. To what extent does critical theory play a role in your professional life as a librarian? [Choose one]
   a. A great extent.
   b. Somewhat
   c. A little bit
   d. Not at all

7. Give an example or two of how you have applied a critical theory concept to your practice as a librarian. [text box]

8. Hypothetically, what other ways might you consider applying critical theory concepts to your practice as a librarian? [text box]

9. Briefly, what might librarians do that would to further the adoption of critical theory and the application of critical theory concepts to professional practice? [text box]

10. What keywords or theorists would you associate with critical theory? [text box]

11. Which of the following terms would you associate with critical theory? Choose all that apply:
   a. Feminist Criticism
   b. Critical Race Theory
   c. Marxist Criticism
   d. Queer Theory
   e. Post Colonialism
   f. Critical pedagogy
   g. None of the above terms.

[Group B Questions]

12. What were your undergraduate and graduate majors in college? [text box]

Some issues in contemporary society relate to social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability or disability and power imbalances between different groups in society. The following 5 questions relate to the intersection of these issues and libraries, librarians, or librarianship.

13. Do you believe that any of the following issues affect libraries or librarianship? Choose as many as apply:
14. Can you give a brief example or two of how one or more of the issues listed above affect libraries or librarianship? [text box]

15. Do any of these issues inform your practice as a librarian in a substantive way? Choose as many as apply:
   a. social class
   b. race
   c. ethnicity
   d. gender
   e. sexual orientation
   f. ability or disability
   g. power imbalances between groups in society.
   h. none of the above affect libraries or librarianship

16. Can you give a brief example or two of how one or more of the issues listed above inform your practice as a librarian? [text box]

17. If librarians were to get more involved in the issues listed above as they affect the profession of librarianship, what are the most important actions they can take? [text box]