**Knowledge of Critical Theories and the Influence on LIS Graduate Studies**

**Mikaela Slade**

**Library & Information Sciences, Dominican University**

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**Professor Karen Brown**

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**Introduction**

The term “Critical Theory” is often associated with its origin: the product of a group of Marxist German philosophers in the 1920s known as the Frankfurt School. To them, in order for a theory to be considered “critical”, it must identify, interrogate, and present achievable goals for current social realities that oppress and dominate other peoples. Democratic values are central to Critical Theory, with the goal of reducing oppression and promoting emancipation (Bohman, 2019). More broadly, the use of “critical theories” refers to any philosophical approach with similar aims. In brief, critical theory is a tradition of interrogating structures of thought, culture, and society, typically of the Western world and usually through the lens of an oppressed group. Critical theories such as Marxism, Feminism, Gender/Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Post-colonial Theory are often taught in the social sciences and humanities.

The Library and Information profession did not employ critical approaches to their field until the 1970s. Since then, more LIS professionals have called for and written about including critical theories and practices in the broader scope of librarianship. In 2014, Robert Schroeder and Christopher V. Hollister published the results to their survey entitled “Librarians’ Views on Critical Theories and Critical Practices”. The purpose of their survey was to gauge practicing librarians’ familiarity with critical theories and how that might inform library practice. They divided the survey into those who had some familiarity with the critical theories and those who did not and found that, of those who were familiar, “more than two-thirds…learned about critical theory in college, with only 14 percent encountering it in a library science course.”

Critical theories are inherently linked with social justice issues due to their criticism of oppressive systems. Library and Information Sciences is often touted as a profession based upon social justice ideals such as democracy and intellectual freedom. Researchers such as Kay Mathiesen argue that a LIS-specific theoretical framework around social justice is needed:” “In order for this trend in LIS to have its promised impact… there is a strong need for LIS to develop its own understanding of social justice.” (2015, p. 199). One possible way to develop this understanding is by building off of and developing existing critical theories. Yet, critical theories are often not addressed in library school education. Part of this survey’s purpose was an attempt to examine the gap between LIS courses addressing social justice issues without also explicitly exploring critical theories.

**Purpose of Study**

Building off of Schroeder and Hollister’s findings, this survey looks at a population of twelve graduate students in Dominican University’s Library and Information Science program and how their background knowledge in critical theories informs their graduate studies. The purpose was to better understand their familiarity with critical theories and if they thought the inclusion of such theories in LIS was/would be valuable. Critical theories typically play a large part in academia, especially in the realm of Humanities. Library and Information Science has the potential to incorporate more of these theories into coursework and publications. The purpose is to explore how familiar graduate students are with different critical theories based on their undergraduate educations, if they make efforts to include what they have learned in current work, and if there is an interest to pursue further learning in that regard.

**Method**

The study was conducted via online survey through anonymous Google Forms. The survey was distributed to participants along with other surveys through the Canvas platform as part of coursework of the 2020 Summer Semester of Dominican University’s Library and Information Science’s 708-02 class. The survey was comprised of five open-ended questions with a brief explanation of critical theories in case of unfamiliarity. This explanation was as follows:

“The next five questions focus on an area of study often referred to as critical theories. In brief, critical theory is a tradition of interrogating structures of thought, culture, and society, typically of the Western world and usually through the lens of an oppressed group. Some examples include Feminism, Marxism, Critical Race Theory, etc.”

Respondents were encouraged to write in complete sentences and expand upon their answers to the best of their ability. The time commitment for this specific survey was estimated to be around 10 to 15 minutes.

**Results**

*Question 1 - Please discuss your familiarity with different types of critical theories and how you were first introduced.*

This question is designed to assess the baseline of knowledge towards critical theories in general as well as specific theories within the participants’ repertoires. Schroeder and Hollister’s study found that many librarians had learned of critical theories through higher education, especially in the Humanities. I suspected that this would be true among graduate students too. 6 out of 12 respondents directly credited “undergraduate degree” or “college” in contributing to their knowledge of critical theories. One person referenced that their daughter was a college student and that they were learning from her. Another admitted that such theories had been covered in an academic setting, but they were unsure what made a theory critical or not. Two persons questioned said that they were “somewhat” and “slightly” knowledgeable and this was due to their own personal research into the subject.

As seen in Figure 1, the most common example of a distinct critical theory was Feminism. 7 out of 12 respondents mentioned Feminist theory/ideology. I included “gender studies” along with Feminism because these two theories often overlap and they both deal with the treatment of sex and gender. Similarly, Critical Race Theory was discussed specifically twice but I included the individual reference to “African American Studies” under the broader umbrella of Race-Related Theories. Marxism was acknowledged three times by name but Socio-Economic Theories in general were brought up five times, making it the second most frequent category.

According to these results, Feminism appears to be the most “mainstream” of all the critical theories and is also the most easily shared. Two respondents shared that they learned about it from either friends or family. It was also reported “that I feel the most confident in my knowledge of” the theory and was introduced to two respondents in middle school and another in high school.

Figure

*Question 2* **-** *In your opinion, does knowledge of critical theories increase awareness of social issues? How or how not?*

Since the LIS profession is based on providing information as a social good, I thought it was important to see if the respondents perceived a link between critical theories and awareness of social issues. The answer was overwhelmingly “yes” with 10 out of 12 participants affirming that knowledge of critical theories deepened understanding of social injustices. The supporting comments included the importance of acknowledging privilege and white-centric narratives, uplifting oppressed voices, and “understanding how the structures of our society work” in order to change them. The two other answers were “not sure” and “somewhat, but needs to focus on real world in addition to theory”. No results showed active resistance. Through these answers we can assume that these graduate students are passionate, or at least educated, about social issues and believe in the idea that knowledge “naturally increases awareness”. This confidence in the importance of knowledge is fitting for individuals hoping to work in the library and information fields.

*Question 3 - To what extent does your knowledge of critical theories reveal itself in your graduate work? Provide examples.*

Like the last question, there is an established connection between critical theories and social justice issues. However, the actual way these two concepts interacted within students’ graduate work was less clear. This question was designed to evaluate the students’ individual contributions to their coursework and if they actively built off their previous knowledge of critical theories. Out of the ten responses, the majority referenced projects and discussions within their courses that dealt with social justice issues, such as “avoid[ing] stereotypes” and “advocacy in public libraries”. However, only three individuals addressed how they use specific critical theories in their coursework:

* “I chose to write a paper on prison libraries that indirectly referenced Critical Race Theory.”
* “I often discuss my involvement with feminism in my work when discussing gender identities and issues of trans rights.”
* “In cataloging we discussed the implications of advanced methods of identification in photographs, where several black subjects were uncomfortable. Without the knowledge of race theory and its emphasis on a history of white supremacy in policing and identifying black Americans, that assignment would not have been effective.”

From these comments, we can assume that knowledge of critical theories can enhance understanding and add meaning to coursework.

Yet, as a couple other comments pointed out, theoretical knowledge is not the only way to become familiar with social issues.

* “I think theories like diversity, inclusion, and equity are very prominent in our curriculum and are addressed in several areas of classes.”
* “I think I am social justice motivated in a general sense, but not in a sense where these critical theories are revealed in my work.”

*Question 4 - To what extent do your Library & Information Science courses and coursework address critical theories? Provide examples.*

This question was designed to evaluate students’ perceptions on their professors and curriculums regarding whether or not there is intentional inclusion of critical theories. The results were mixed without a clear consensus. Two comments mentioned, again, that most classes discuss social issues but not explicitly critical theories. Two other respondents think critical theories were “briefly” or “not really” addressed but both expressed a desire to learn more. Another two participants felt that critical theories were integrated by exposure to other points of view through “open-ended and reflective assignments” and “literature articles”. Both mentioned learning from the diverse knowledge of their classmates. Then, one thought that no critical theories had been addressed at all and one was unsure. Finally, there were two comments that gave specific examples of critical theories in their classes:

* “My course on Cataloguing 703 was the best at addressing this issue. [The professor] worked in a lot of the interesting intersections of changing identities and the sexism inherent to terminology that can exist in a cataloguing framework. For example, discussing the nature of transpersons changing names and needing to change their unique identifiers in systems, as well as limits on gender identity options in systems to merely male or female.”
* “In one course there were readings about indigenous art exhibits and the ways curators work to make the exhibit respectful, in collaboration with the native people. Indigenous perspectives on western nations founded by European colonists, the indigenous perspective is perhaps the most ignored, but this course made an effort to examine LIS institutions through the lense of race theory with an indigenous perspective.”

It seems that, while most courses engage in social issues to some extent, the inclusion of critical theories in coursework is largely left up to the professor’s discretion.

*Question 5 - In your opinion, should academic Library & Information Science focus more on critical theories? Why or why not?*

Figure

Out of the ten responses, six said “yes”, they would like more inclusion of critical theories in academic LIS, two were unsure or neutral, and two said “no” they did not think it should be included in a LIS degree. One explanation was that there was not enough time in the program and that theories were addressed in some aspect already. The other comment had mixed sentiments: “No, but only in the sense that it is not up to information professionals to be the arbiters of culture. These theories absolutely need to be addressed in the curriculum because they are necessary for understanding as many social and cultural issues that may impact communities so that a library can make sure it is serving it's community. Ultimately, that is the most important thing that librarians should be learning how to do. If one wants to study critical theory there are other degrees. Perhaps there could be an elective course on critical theories.” In my interpretation, this comment is affirming the status quo of LIS as a program/profession that includes discussion on social issues but not more in-depth inclusion of critical theories.

**Presentation of Findings**

There are several limitations of this research. Firstly, the sample size is too small to extend any significant generalizations to the wider population. Each question received between ten to twelve responses, which is not enough to be statistically significant. Furthermore, some of the wording in the survey or this report could have biases due to my own personal opinions, despite my attempts to remain objective. For instance, the brief explanation at the beginning of the survey included common examples of critical theories to help illustrate the concept. However, this could have unintentionally skewed the responses to include the examples listed.

Additionally, this survey did not gather additional demographic information on the participants such as gender, race, or age. These factors could also have an additional influence on the data gathered.

Still, I think this research is a good first step in assessing the previous exposure and interest of graduate students with critical theories. This could benefit LIS educators and administrators in determining the value of critical theories in the curriculum. From the data gathered, it appears that most LIS student have some basic familiarity with critical theories and also desire to learn more. It also became clear that the line between critical theories and social justice issues often overlaps and that clarification is needed for these concepts.

**Recommended actions**

I recommend expanded research on the possible benefits or limitations on expanding critical theory education within Dominican University and other LIS institutions. I think a survey of a broader population could be useful and interviewing professors as well as students. I also think more information is needed on the practical aspects of critical theories and if background knowledge is influential to LIS professionals.

In my opinion, critical theories are a useful analytical framework for addressing complex issues surrounding oppressed people and unjust systems. Library and Information ethics rely on democratic principles to improve communities. As Bohman (2019) states, “…critical theories are not democratic theories, but their practical consequences are assessed and verified in democratic practice and solved by inquiry into better democratic practice.” The expansion of critical theories in Library and Informational Science curriculum and practice could be beneficial to not only practitioners but those they serve.

**Works Cited**

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