

# FEMINIST PRAXIS IN LIBRARY LEADERSHIP

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## INTRODUCTION

We all agree feminist leadership is a good thing, but what does it even mean? What makes leadership feminist? These questions, innocently posed over a friendly discussion, led to more questions and more discussions, which served as the foundation for this research and book chapter. As friends who frequently delve into discussions of race, whiteness, feminism, intersectionality, and the library profession, we realized that this opening question was more than a rhetorical conversation starter: We wanted answers. And when we looked to existing library literature and found little in the way of response, we realized that there existed a research gap that we could fill.

For both of us, this research project has grown out of our own personal scholarship. April has been doing extensive work examining intersections of identity, oppressive normativity, whiteness, and the ways these concepts play out in the library profession.<sup>1</sup> Jennifer's work critically examines diversity and inclusion practices, intersectional feminist praxis, and whiteness

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<sup>1</sup> April Hathcock, "White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS," *In the Library With the Lead Pipe* (October 7, 2015), <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/lis-diversity/>; and April Hathcock, *At the Intersection* (blog), <https://aprilhathcock.wordpress.com/>.

in the information profession.<sup>2</sup> As a result of her work in this area, Jennifer was asked to serve as the closing keynote speaker for the 2015 Taiga Forum in Vancouver, British Columbia, during which she proposed a birds of a feather discussion on feminist leadership. At the end of a long and thought-provoking discussion, Shirley Lew, one of the editors of this volume, asked a crucial question that hits on the very essence of our research: “Isn’t feminist leadership just about being a decent human being”?

In this research study, we take this simple yet provocative question as a starting point for an exploration of how feminist theories inform the thinking and practice of library leaders. How can feminism, in particular intersectional feminism, help us think critically about core library values such as diversity, inclusivity, and respect? How does a feminist praxis affect organizational culture? Can feminism help us become better mentors for the next generation of leaders? Could we better address the diversity problem in the profession? How is feminist-informed leadership different from just being “a decent human being?” And what does this all look like in practice?

We decided to ask feminist leaders in the library profession how their feminist values inform and affect everyday management and leadership activities such as staffing, mentoring, policy development, and decision-making. In this way, we hoped to provide readers with real-life examples of the everyday practice of feminism in library leadership, to offer practical approaches that others can adopt or adapt, and to understand some of the challenges in bringing an overt feminist praxis into our library practice.

It is important to note how knowledge and meaning are created in this chapter. We recognize that what our interview subjects shared with us was constructed through their own experiences, shaped by their memories, and then further molded through their selection of which experiences to recount to us and how. As interviewers, we brought our own experiences, knowledge, biases, and agendas to the interviews that we conducted and to how we interpreted and recorded the meaning of our interviewees’ words. The technology we used to conduct the interviews, the interview method, the timing we

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2 Jennifer Vinopal, “The Quest for Diversity in Library Staffing: From Awareness to Action,” *In the Library With the Lead Pipe* (January 13, 2016), <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2016/quest-for-diversity/>; and Jennifer Vinopal, *Library Sphere* (blog), <http://vinopal.org/blog/>.

imposed on our conversations, all served to shape and construct the information that we now analyze and present here.

Our experiences and biases also manifest as we write, as we choose what to emphasize and what to exclude, what meaning we make of it, and the words we use to express ourselves. DeVault and Gross, in their article on feminist interviewing, recommend:

[an] awareness that researchers are always working with accounts constructed linguistically, that experience recounted is always emergent in the moment, that telling requires a listener and that the listening shapes the account as well as the telling, that both telling and listening are shaped by discursive histories (so that fragments of many other tellings are carried in any embodied conversation), and so on.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, we approach this work with that awareness, knowing that as a straight cisgender white woman from the United States Northeast and a straight cisgender black woman from the U.S. South, we bring our own experiences, backgrounds, histories, and preconceived ideas to bear, even as we look to our research participants to make meaning in our work. For us, this is a deeply personal work to fill a much-needed gap in the library literature on feminist leadership praxis.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Jean Lau Chin notes in the abstract of her 2003 Presidential Address before the Division 35 Society for the Psychology of Women, “Although the theories and models on feminism and leadership exist, there has been little study of the intersection of the two.”<sup>4</sup> Fourteen years later, at the publication of this current volume, Chin’s observation still holds true, particularly in the realm of library and information studies. Much of the literature we reviewed for this study either focused on gendered differences in leadership styles and outcomes in LIS or focused on the application of feminist theory to the practice of library and information studies work, without a particular view toward the practice of leadership.

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3 Marjorie L. DeVault and Glenda Gross, “Feminist Interviewing: Experience, Talk, and Knowledge,” in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), 179.

4 Jean Lau Chin, “2003 Division 35 Presidential Address: Feminist Leadership: Feminist Visions and Diverse Voices,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 28 (2004): 1.

With regards to gendered differences in leadership development and expectations in library and information professions, we made particular note of two articles, one from the mid-1980s and one from 2015. In her 1985 survey of male and female public library directors in the U.S., Joy Greiner uncovers significant differences based on gender in career development options, support, salary, and resources.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, two decades later, in their piece on gendered expectations of library leaders, Jessica Olin and Michelle Millet find similar trends at play, including gendered differences in the ways library leaders are treated by their staff and colleagues.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Olin and Millet call for an end to the binary method of examining gender in library leadership, with a view toward building a more gender-inclusive examination of library leadership issues.

While these studies and others like them have been important in uncovering the gendered issues that arise in library and information studies leadership, they do not examine the role that feminist theory and practice can play in the development and day-to-day work of library leaders. On the other hand, there has been an increasing amount of research surfacing in the library literature regarding the application of feminist theory to library practice apart from leadership. In their piece on feminist theory and library discovery, Bess Sadler and Chris Bourg reject the myth of library neutrality and expose the ways in which a feminist approach can guide library interactions centered on advocacy and embodiment.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, in her book about feminist pedagogy in library instruction, Maria Accardi examines the way that feminist theory can be applied to library instruction to enhance librarian-student relationships and promote an enriched and embodied learning experience.<sup>8</sup>

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5 Joy Greiner, "A Comparative Study of the Career Development Patterns of Male and Female Library Administrators in Large Public Libraries," *Library Trends* 34, no. 2 (1985): 280-81.

6 Jessica Olin and Michelle Millet, "Gendered Expectations for Leadership in Libraries," *In the Library With the Lead Pipe* (November 4, 2015), <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/libleadgender/>.

7 Bess Sadler and Chris Bourg, "Feminism and The Future of Library Discovery," *Code4Lib Journal*, no. 28 (April 15, 2015), <http://journal.code4lib.org/articles/10425>.

8 Maria T. Accardi, ed., *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2013).

As with the studies on gendered differences in library leadership opportunities, this work on the application of feminist theory to general library practice is key for the profession, but it does not capture the ways in which feminist theory can apply to library leadership specifically. In fact, the only study in the library literature that discusses the link between feminism and library leadership is a 2014 study by Marta Deyrup. In her work, Deyrup surveyed over 200 women library administrators for their opinions on second-wave feminism and the ways it has affected their career opportunities in library leadership.<sup>9</sup> While the study combines an examination of leadership and feminist theory, it does so within the context of gendered differences in the perception of and opportunities for library leadership and not within the context of applying feminist practice to the work of library leadership. Further, Deyrup's study focuses entirely on female library leaders and in many ways conflates *feminine* leadership traits with *feminist* leadership traits. The former focuses on the ways in which women lead differently from men, while the latter focuses on applying the theory and praxis of feminism to one's leadership work, regardless of gender identity. A focus on feminine leadership traits runs the risk of being essentialist in its approach and analysis and is not as helpful to understanding the ways that feminist theory, and its attendant concerns with social justice, can be activated in library leadership practice by all leaders, regardless of their gender identity.

Given the lack of research available specifically on feminist leadership in the library literature, we broadened our scope to look at existing feminist leadership research in education, a related field. We enlarged our scope even further to encompass research in secondary as well as higher education, in which we both work. We also looked at research beyond North America, where we both are based, to work that is being done in other parts of the world.

As a theoretical basis for our research, we relied heavily on Jill Blackmore's work on applying feminist theory to teacher and

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9 Marta Deyrup, "Academic Library Leadership, Second-Wave Feminism, and Twenty-First Century Humanism: Reflections on a Changing Profession," in *Leadership in Academic Libraries Today: Connecting Theory to Practice*, eds. Bradford Lee Eden and Jody Condit Fagan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 91-107.

administrator leadership in Australian secondary schools.<sup>10</sup> Blackmore takes a systemic approach to examining the role of feminist leadership in promoting a more just and equitable educational system for students, parents, and teachers. She examines the power dynamics within the Australian school system in general and within certain schools in particular. Her goal is to apply feminist theory in such a way as to “orient leadership in the educational setting toward social justice within an intersectional context.”<sup>11</sup> As she notes, “For feminists, leadership is about gendered power relations that impact on social justice. . . . Focusing on social justice mean[s] . . . addressing issues of inequality, power, responsibility and ethics.”<sup>12</sup> To this end, Blackmore views feminist leadership as being a phenomenon that can occur at any level of the educational institution and is not limited to administrator-level responsibilities.<sup>13</sup> In addition, she is cautious throughout her work to distinguish between the application of *feminist* leadership theory for social justice and *feminine* leadership theory, which results in an essentialist view of leadership rooted in gender binaries.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of methodology, we looked to the work of Jane Strachan and Tracy Barton to examine ways of applying feminist research methodology to the research of feminist leadership in education. In her study of three secondary school principals in New Zealand, all of whom self-identified as feminists, Strachan adopted a feminist research methodology to study the ways in which feminist leadership, rooted in emancipatory politics, informed the day-to-day work of school administrators.<sup>15</sup> Employing a feminist qualitative research design, Strachan conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with the study participants, as well as observing them first hand at work and reviewing documents relevant to their work. Though all three

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10 Jill Blackmore, *Troubling Women: Feminism, Leadership, and Educational Change* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 1-20; and Jill Blackmore, “Social Justice and the Study and Practice of Leadership in Education: A Feminist History,” *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 38, no. 2 (2006): 185-200.

11 Blackmore, “Social Justice,” 187.

12 Ibid.

13 Blackmore, *Troubling Women*, 6.

14 Ibid., 18.

15 Jane Strachan, “Feminist Educational Leadership: Locating the Concepts in Practice,” *Gender and Education* 11, no. 3 (1999): 309-22.

participants were women, in her analysis Strachan is cautious to avoid characterizing feminine leadership rather than feminist leadership: “Essentialism masks the differences in feminist leadership philosophy and practice and can be destructive in that it hides much of the rich tapestry of how leadership is practised by different feminists working in different contexts.”<sup>16</sup> Instead, she takes an intersectional approach to her work, noting the ways that race, culture, class, geography, as well as gender, affect the work of the women—two white and one Pacific Islander—she interviewed. Strachan concludes that these women engage in active, creative, and flexible feminist practice to build caring educational communities that best serve the needs of their students and the students’ families.

Using a similar feminist methodology, Tracy Barton, relying in part on Strachan’s previous work, conducted a study of feminist leadership among seven women higher education administrators in the Midwestern U.S.<sup>17</sup> Barton engaged in semi-structured interviews with the participants who self-identified as feminists and who represented a variety of institutional, professional, and racial/ethnic backgrounds. In her analysis, Barton takes an intersectional approach to her findings, drawing out a number of emergent themes and relating them back to the ways in which they interact with the interviewees’ varying racial, ethnic, sexual, and even religious identities. Some of the more common themes Barton uncovers in her study include fairness, equity, and justice; voice; marginalization; and community development.<sup>18</sup> For all of the women, these themes play key roles in their feminist leadership practice, a finding that bears out in our own examination within the library context.

## METHODOLOGY

As feminists talking to other feminists in order to write a chapter about how feminism informs leadership practice, it was a natural

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<sup>16</sup> Strachan, “Feminist Educational Leadership,” 311.

<sup>17</sup> Tracy R. Barton, “A Feminist Construction of Leadership in American Higher Education” (Ph.D. diss., University of Toledo, 2006), ProQuest (UMI 3264478); and Tracy R. Barton, “Feminist Leadership: Building Nurturing Academic Communities,” *Advancing Women in Leadership* 22 (2006).

<sup>18</sup> Barton, “A Feminist Construction,” 172-77; and Barton, “Feminist Leadership,” n.p.

choice for us to choose a feminist research method for our study. In light of the methods used in Strachan's and Barton's works, we decided to conduct in-depth personal interviews using a general interview guide approach in order, literally, to *give voice* to feminist library leaders on this little-studied topic. While no research methods are inherently feminist in their own right, qualitative methods that elicit new knowledge on feminist practice and also provide a means to interrogate the research process itself are particularly valued by feminists.<sup>19</sup> In keeping with our feminist approach, we designed a set of open-ended questions that would guide our conversation with each of the interviewees, while still keeping the topic open enough for participants to shape the discussions as we went.

In order to identify interviewees, we mined our professional networks, looking for colleagues whose words or actions within a public context indicated a feminist perspective, for example, speaking or publishing on topics relevant to intersectional feminism, critical librarianship, or queer or critical race theory. In addition to a feminist perspective, we looked for participants who evinced functional leadership within the profession, which might be demonstrated through, for example, their influence on the shape and direction of professional conversations and thought, a commitment to developing new leaders, an impact on platforms or tools (technical or analog) that promote an open or social justice agenda, or ongoing work to influence policy at a national or international level. For us, the distinction between functional (or situational) leadership and positional (or by-appointment) leadership is crucial: While not mutually exclusive, we do not assume that everyone appointed to high-level positions in the profession are necessarily performing leadership as we define it. Instead, we focused on those feminists who exert influence on our profession, no matter their place within the professional hierarchy or their longevity within librarianship.

Our eleven participants, to whom we have promised anonymity so they would feel free to say things they might not otherwise have shared, represent a diverse set of perspectives and identities. We included people of different ages, gender identities and expressions,

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19 Sharon Brisolara, "Feminist Theory: Its Domains and Applications," in *Feminist Evaluation and Research: Theory and Practice*, eds. Sharon Brisolara, Denise Seigart, and Saumitra SenGupta (New York: The Guildford Press, 2014), 19.



sexual orientations, abilities, races, and ethnicities, and we sought representation from different-sized organizations, both public and private. Six of our interviewees were people of color, and five were white. Three use gender pronouns he/him/his, seven use gender pronouns she/her/hers, and one uses the gender pronouns they/them/theirs. Three are early career professionals, three mid-career, and five have more seniority in the profession. Seven currently live and work on the East Coast of the United States, two on the West Coast of the United States, and two in Western Canada.

The selection criteria and our method for identifying interviewees are subjective and prone to bias. Because we relied on our own professional networks to identify participants, of the initial list of more than thirty potential interviewees, all were personally known to at least one of us. Since we had limited time for interviews, and in order to ensure diversity in our final set, we narrowed the list to eleven based on our knowledge of the participants and the various experiences and perspectives we thought they would bring to our conversations and our thinking on the topic. Given more time, we might have used a snowball sampling method (also prone to bias) in order to enlarge our set.<sup>20</sup>

No matter how collaborative and open-ended we were in our conversations with participants, we acknowledge the imbalance of power in a setting where we, the authors, would ultimately get to assign meaning to the data collected. In her chapter “Feminist Theory: Its Domains and Applications,” Brisolaro presents six key feminist principles of evaluation that all have bearing on our own methodology:

- Knowledge is culturally, socially, and temporally contingent.
- Knowledge is a powerful resource that serves an explicit or implicit purpose.
- Evaluation is a political activity; evaluators’ personal experiences, perspectives, and characteristics come from and lead to a particular political stance.

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<sup>20</sup> Snowball sampling involves asking initial research participants to suggest additional participants, allowing the sample to increase or “snowball.” Kathi N. Miner, Toby Epstein Jayaratne, Amanda Pesonen, and Lauren Zurbrügg. “Using Survey Research as a Quantitative Method for Feminist Social Change.” In *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), 210.

- Research methods, institutions, and practices are social constructs.
- There are multiple ways of knowing.
- Gender inequities are one manifestation of social injustice. Discrimination cuts across race, class, and culture and is inextricably linked to all three.<sup>21</sup>

We, therefore, make no claims to objectivity in this study. Rather, our purpose was to mine the experiences of a small set of feminist leaders in order to *collaboratively* make meaning of the research topic through open-ended, guided conversation. We believe that this subjective and subject-oriented method is, indeed, complementary to our openly political agenda, which is to promote research on and use of feminist leadership practices in libraries.

#### TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

After confirming that this study was exempted by our local institutional review board from full review, we contacted our potential interviewees, inviting them to participate in our research, and all eleven readily agreed. We told them the general topics we would discuss, how the interview would be structured, and that we would record the interviews only to help us in our note taking and analysis. We assured them that we would not publish the recordings and would destroy them at the end of the project.

For the interviews, we formulated open-ended interview questions to elicit responses on the following topics:

- What is feminism?
- What is leadership?
- What are some examples of your feminist leadership actions?
- How are you addressing issues of diversity and inclusion?
- What do you read that informs your feminism and/or your leadership?
- What other related topics would you like to tell us about?

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<sup>21</sup> Brisolara, "Feminist Theory," 23-29.

During the interviews, we took turns reading interview questions and gave each other space to probe and pursue topics as they came up. We conducted the interviews with Skype and recorded audio with QuickTime. We then used an auto-captioning tool provided by our institution as a first pass to create transcriptions and cleaned them manually. Once we had accurate transcripts, we clustered the interviewees' quotes thematically by creating a document listing the key topics discussed in the interviews and then copying quotes from the transcripts into the relevant theme areas within the document. As we discovered other recurring topics that interviewees discussed, we added them to the document along with the relevant quotes.

## COMMON THEMES

We were overwhelmed by the wealth of knowledge, experience, and personal stories participants were willing to share with us. In analyzing the data, we uncovered three broad themes, corresponding to general questions from our interviews:

- What does being a feminist mean to you?
- What makes leadership feminist?
- What tips or advice do you have for others looking to activate their feminism at work?

### What Does Being a Feminist Mean to You?

One of the first questions we asked each of our interviewees was, "What does being a feminist mean to you?" While we approached this research with our own preconceived ideas about what constituted a feminist and had even selected our research participants based on those ideas, we wanted to begin our interviews by laying those preconceived notions aside in order to hear from our participants, in their own voices, what it meant to engage in feminist praxis.

Interestingly, one common thread that surfaced in many of their responses was the fact that their personal definitions of feminism were rooted more in their embodied experiences than in any sort of textbook understanding of feminist theory:

I was thinking just what would my definition be and I think I don't know that I could actually come up with one and I really struggled because it's always been such a part of my life.

I think I would probably say that I have had an inclination and an orientation toward women's issues, towards feminist issues and issues of race and class in my work and in my professional practice for a long time. But really became much more conscious when . . . [describes hearing someone at a conference describe interviewee's work as "feminist"] . . . So there was that moment of crystallisation where I was listening to somebody else describing my work, thinking "Oh yeah, right, you put all that together and, you know, that's a feminist!"

There was a roundtable informal discussion that sprung up as a part of the work we were doing. To be honest, in public that might have been the first time that I ever decided to identify as a feminist. It was crazy hard. It was something I had never done before. It's not to say in any way that I haven't thought about it and in some ways try to practice some of the principles there. But that was sort of my first coming out, if you will.

For many of our participants, feminist praxis was a part of their lives and politics, long before they knew or thought to use the label.

In some ways, this natural link between embodied experience and feminism may have arisen from a connection between realization of feminist identity and interaction with others. As the last two quotes above demonstrate, several of our participants came into their self-identity as feminists from their interactions with other feminists. For at least one of our participants, this interaction began early in childhood through a relationship with a feminist parent:

I guess for me in order to answer that question I have to go back to my childhood. The fact that I was raised by a feminist. And my mother was a big influence on me. . . . So I just had a very heightened sense of feminism as an active, real-life thing that had consequences for people in my whole family, I guess you might say.

Despite this connection between interpersonal relationships, embodied experience, and feminist self-identity, however, participants expressed discomfort recognizing having any sort of expertise or authority in the realm of feminist theory. Repeatedly participants lamented that they did not know enough feminist theory or had not read enough

feminist theorists to be able to give an authoritative perspective on what it means to be a feminist:

But that's definitely an area that I feel like I sometimes get impostor syndrome, like, "Oh, I don't know enough" or "I need to read more" or "Let me pull up a Wikipedia article." . . . However, I feel like I need to read more all the time.

I haven't read enough about intersectional feminism as a theory to be, like, that's my home.

And so I think that's why I'm more and more aware lately that I'm behind in my reading and I need to catch up.

I don't always feel like I'm totally well-read in it. In theory per se.

Moreover, several participants asked, at the end of the interview, that we share our personal reading lists with them so that they could "catch up" on their feminist reading. We gladly complied with these requests while assuring all our participants of how much they had to teach us and others about being a feminist leader. Their feelings of inadequacy notwithstanding, interview participants described the kinds of critical work that influences them: queer theory, critical race theory, intersectional feminist theory, critical pedagogy and librarianship. They specifically named Michel Foucault, Sara Ahmed, bell hooks (*Teaching to Transgress*), Roxanne Gay (*Bad Feminist*), Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill-Collins (*Black Feminist Thought*), Adrienne Rich (*Of Woman Born*), and Rebecca Traister (*All the Single Ladies*),<sup>22</sup> who have given them insight into the power politics of the workplace, intersectional oppression, and, as one of our interviewees said, the "gendered aspects of everyday life" in the library profession.

In terms of applying an intersectional context to their feminism, all participants identified their feminism as being necessarily intersectional. For them, feminism could not meaningfully exist without considerations of other axes of oppression, such as race, sexual orientation, class, disability, and other marginalized identities:

I would say that it always comes down to fighting for and advocating for gender equality. And that's also taking into account the ideas of intersectionality. So for me feminism should encompass all women

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22 Here we include specific book titles if interviewees mentioned them.

and all women's experiences, not just necessarily what has historically been the interests of white feminism.

Being a feminist means to me that I think about power dynamics in the workplace, but [also] in interpersonal relationships. That I have an awareness, that I'm bringing to my own and to others' awareness power dynamics within institutions and interpersonal relationships. So that can be about gender; it can be about the dynamics between women and men. But for me it very much also means on other axes of power, so around race, class, ability, any kind of things where power dynamics get skewed and where, particularly in a work setting, particularly where the institution plays a role and imbalances get systematized. That's what I think feminism is.

You know, I have a broad-based commitment to justice and equality so I think when a lot of people think about feminism, it's just situated in equality for women. And I think the larger, over time, the bigger picture way that I've thought about it is really in terms of intersectionality. So it's not just addressing the fact that people are unequal; it's really beginning to examine the structure of those systems and how they interplay. How racism is reflected in the systems we build as well as the economic structures that are formed out of these systems.

For me, patriarchy is intimately bound with white supremacy and heterosexism. They're part of the package. . . . But I would say, interestingly, being involved in the library community has deepened my understanding of feminism, or broadened it, whatever the word is, particularly in respect to intersectionality.

Yeah, I think it's hard to talk about that without talking about race, too. Especially since I'm sure you know black feminism is different sometimes than white feminism. So you're advocating for both, for people of color and for women, too.

A few of our participants actually identified more readily with another axis of identity and oppression, that is, sexual orientation, and placed that identity at the fore of their feminist work:

It's interesting because I think of myself as a queer before I think of myself as a feminist. But I guess, you know, feminism means equity and fair distribution of opportunities and life chances. And I believe in that and I believe in that for all people. And not just for women. . . . I would love a feminism that was big enough that I didn't feel like I had to qualify it. Yeah, a hundred percent. Right, like that everybody is constructed based on different kinds of systems and have different kinds of identities related to those systems. I haven't read enough

about intersectional feminism as a theory to be, like that's my home. But I definitely believe that women have multiple identities. You know, no one boils down to a single identity.

I see these intersections and again I identify as a gay [person of color] and I feel like there are all these kind of things that overlap and intersect. So seeing myself represented or not being represented . . . that there is this kind of template that you can also overlay when it comes to what it means to be a feminist, you know being a woman in this profession. You know these things overlap and they intersect and they mirror each other. . . . I look at, say, what it is to be a [non-white] librarian also applies to being a gay librarian, also applies to being a feminist librarian. In this, you know, crazy mixed up world of librarianship.

For all participants, being a feminist involved embodied knowledge and experience, firmly rooted in intersectionality and the multiple ways that identity and power interplay.

#### What Makes Leadership Feminist?

Ironically, despite everyone's willingness, even excitement, to talk to us about the topic, most interviewees expressed some doubts about the possibility of feminist leadership. In some this manifested as surprise that we considered them leaders in the profession at all. Other interviewees were ambivalent about the tension between the ideals and values of feminism, as they define it, and the idea of leadership from the top levels of an organization, because of the potential for power imbalance and the fear that this power might compromise one's values.

Despite these concerns, interviewees saw feminism as an antidote to power-wielding, ego-driven leadership, and saw it as providing a set of values and practices akin to the kind of "practice of freedom" in education that bell hooks advocates.<sup>23</sup> They all felt that feminist leadership is not the same as other kinds of leadership; it's definitely not positional. For many, feminist leadership is about moving people toward a common goal through influence (not ego), and one of the crucial roles of a leader is to look for and develop people within the organization, wherever they are in rank, who have the potential to

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<sup>23</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4. hooks emphasizes "the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination."

become leaders and affect positive organizational change in their own right. This is especially true if they don't "fit the mold" of a typical library leader.

Thus, when asked to describe what specifically makes leadership feminist, as opposed to more traditional, non-feminist forms of leadership, participants focused on the importance of employing leadership styles and methods in the service of feminist values, such as community building, creating a safe environment, valuing diversity, empowering others, and information sharing. For all of our participants, feminist leadership centers on acknowledging sources of power and leveraging that power for the benefit of those working for and with them in the organization:

I think that first and foremost the responsibility of a leader is to the people that he or she is charged to serve.

With intersectional feminist leadership, one of the things that you're really looking at is making sure that you're not just advancing the company, but you're advancing and progressing people. That you're not just meeting a business or an organizational bottom line, you're actually committed to the idea of helping people become empowered so that they can change their lives and they can change their communities.

As feminists we always keep in mind the equality aspect; that's one of the biggest things. As a feminist you're always thinking of equality and retention anyways. So you're always thinking "How can I make this better for this person? How can I help keep this person?" It's always in the back of your mind. They are really hand-in-hand.

Feminist leadership is ultimately about correcting for power imbalances and doing so in an open, intentional, and purposeful way. For our interviewees, there is no room for neutrality in feminist leadership:

I think feminist leadership is explicitly political; it explicitly acknowledges the role of power. It explicitly understands that if I do A, I can't do B. And there are implications for why I'm doing that.

Sharing power I see as pretty significant in terms of what I value in leadership or what I see in leadership.

Feminist leadership would be about sharing power, redistributing powers. Making sure that everyone has opportunities. I've never lost anything when someone else got something good.



Our participants see their feminist leadership as a means of enacting feminist ideals in their organizations and within the profession to the benefit of all.

In the quest to achieve these feminist ideals, interviewees, especially those higher up in their organization's hierarchy, see information sharing as a feminist act and as a way to redistribute power and undermine those intransigent structures:

I'm aware that knowledge is power, and that as much knowledge as I can share with my organization, you know, that's a way of sharing power. And there's a bit of a culture of keeping things, of not sharing. So wherever I can, unless there's reasons for personnel or sensitive budget decisions or something like that, I share information.

I am absolutely transparent about everything that I do. I am an over-communicator and I think that's a big part of my feminist ethic at work. It's like everybody knows everything as I know it.

Others specifically highlighted the need for transparency around decision-making processes. Moreover, as they share knowledge and power, they also give others voice in an environment where they might otherwise not be heard. One participant noted,

There are certain people who are very comfortable when an issue is thrown on the table, like they'll always be able to speak, and they'll voice their opinion and they'll speak more than once and they'll take up lots of space. And so we always hear from them. But there are other really smart folks around the table who aren't comfortable in that kind of a setting.

These feminist leaders use their power, their political acumen, and self-knowledge to build supportive communities and workplaces, to think critically about whose voices are centered and whose are marginalized in our profession, and to expose and rectify the inequitable power dynamics in the systems that surround us.

What Tips or Advice Do You have For Others Looking to Activate Their Feminism at Work?

As our goal in conducting this research is to reveal the everyday practice of feminism in library leadership, we asked interviewees to tell us about practical approaches that others can adopt or adapt. They also shared some of the challenges in bringing an overt feminist praxis into their library work. Overall, participants insisted on the primacy of

praxis in their feminism. In a nutshell, if you're just thinking, reading, and theorizing, but you're not doing, you're not doing it right. As one colleague offered, "Theory does have its place as long as there's also action that can come out of that, too." Yet they also emphasized that theory provides a critical perspective for analyzing and strategizing about the day to day. One said, "My approach to leadership becomes more holistic over time the more I read, the more I learn." The practices they discussed reflect the five key feminist values mentioned above—community building, creating a safe environment, valuing diversity, empowering others, and information sharing—which themselves require the ability to understand one's own relationship to power, and a willingness to use it to benefit others. They said:

Be honest about what kind of power you have.

Self reflection and knowing yourself is one of the most important things that you can do.

Be prepared to do the work.

As a precondition to "doing the work," the first and most important thing all participants urged is developing a community or network to rely on:

Find your people and make use of your people and work your network.

That's going to be important because there will be people who will oppose you, and will provide many, many opportunities for you to be blocked.

You can feel a little crazy and a reality check from people who you trust and who are like-minded is super helpful.

Participants also recommended not relying solely on your immediate colleagues for support:

Throw out the org chart when you're looking for allies.

Make connections across the entire system.

Those networks need to be outside of your institution.

If you hear somebody speak at a conference or write a blog post or something that inspires you or that you relate to, talk to them.

In particular, social media was singled out by many as a particularly helpful place to find support.

Participants also talked about creating safe, inclusive environments in which to promote feminist values. As one participant explained,

It's really about creating this framework. It's about signaling that the organization is a place [where] that kind of conversation can happen and that action can happen.

These leaders take responsibility for the welfare of others:

My first responsibility is to everyone that works here at the library and to make sure that I'm doing everything I can to look out for their well-being and their professional development. That's first and foremost.

Along these lines, participants discussed how important it is to interrupt harmful behavior, which they strive to do effectively and respectfully. Whether to confront someone publicly or privately depends on the situation, but overall, such correction is meant to interrupt in the instant as well as to teach:

If I see an injustice, if I see ugliness, I'm going to say something.

If I'm there I intervene immediately. I don't try to do it in an aggressive manner because I don't believe in upbraiding people in . . . public. I don't believe in humiliating people.

So I have actually been pretty stern with a couple of..young men [exhibiting harmful behaviour] in private conversation but in a way that didn't humiliate them in front of a group [and] I think has helped them actually take it to heart.

Participants noted that confronting harmful behavior can be a community effort:

My impulse is not to be directly confrontational but to have other people collectively operate against that force in that instance.

Nonetheless, confrontation is difficult:

There are some cases where the best and most appropriate thing is to pull somebody aside and have a private conversation. . . . And then there are other times where I wonder if that approach . . . [is] actually kind of an act of cowardice on my part.

We want to be nice and we want everyone to like us and the repercussions can be ugly.

One participant, however, acknowledged, “social media is a whole different thing. You know on social media I’ll just call people straight out.” Finally, when building safe and inclusive spaces, participants recognized the importance of self-care, which may include disengaging from a toxic space or conversation when it becomes too time consuming, detrimental, or simply pointless. As one summed up, “There’s no way that you can inspire other people if you’re so burnt out yourself.”

In addition to cultivating safe spaces, these leaders spend a significant amount of time empowering others and providing them opportunities to grow through advocacy, policy setting, and mentoring: “Making opportunities for other people is important.” Participants actively seek out occasions to cultivate leadership in others, especially those who might otherwise be overlooked as potential leaders. One explained,

How I put this into action is in actively thinking about opportunity for leadership and for development of people in my institution and of people in the profession who may not put themselves forward or nominate themselves for a role, but I know they would be fantastic. If they were a member of a more privileged group or if they had had different opportunities, maybe they would be putting themselves forward but they don’t. I will actively try to tap those people, encourage them, support them, and offer the kind of mentorship either by myself or through someone else, to allow them to succeed and to help them to develop.

Cultivating leaders is also a matter of timing. Regarding a colleague who is a working parent, a participant explained,

This is a matter of people having the balance in their life that they want. You know, in five years her kids are not going to be in daycare anymore and she’s still going to have all the skills and abilities that she’s got now. . . . I talk explicitly and support parents in the workplace. For me that is about developing women leaders.

Other day-to-day ways to “make opportunities for other people” include publicly giving credit, structuring meetings in ways that value different communication styles, modeling the behavior you want to cultivate in the organization, and openly acknowledging the power you have and the values that underlie your work.

Regarding the overwhelming and persistent homogeneity of the library profession,<sup>24</sup> participants strive to build diverse and inclusive workplaces through hiring, promotion, and the personal and personnel work needed to create inclusive spaces. Many mentioned the under-representation of staff in the profession based on race and ethnicity, and the additional gender disparities in technology fields. Participants also noted disparities in terms of rank:

The group that was left out and being marginalized in [my] organization were the support staff and I know that's a tension in a lot of libraries.

In supporting career and leadership development among people from underrepresented groups, participants talked about ensuring that early career librarians of color have time and opportunities to gain the skills and experiences to make them successful. Using words like “maneuvering” and “negotiation,” some described strategies for influencing the hiring process in order to increase the likelihood of hiring underrepresented candidates, calling this invisible but important work. In describing candidate evaluation processes, participants related common strategies:

When I am faced with a choice between two candidates...I'm looking at a candidate as, not only are they qualified (because if they weren't qualified on paper they never would have made it through the door), but where I can do some redress to give them additional points on their answers. And sometimes it works. And sometimes it doesn't.

I generally try to couch it in those things that are quantitative rather than qualitative. So even though I might be making my assessment based on qualitative criteria, [I'm] trying to describe it in a quantitative way.

I might say something like ‘Why are we always picking the same kinds of people?’

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24 Chris Bourg, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Librarianship,” *Feral Librarian* (blog), March 3, 2014, <https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2014/03/03/the-unbearable-whiteness-of-librarianship/>; and Angela Galvan, “Soliciting Performance, Hiding Bias: Whiteness and Librarianship,” *In the Library With the Lead Pipe* (June 3, 2015), <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/soliciting-performance-hiding-bias-whiteness-and-librarianship/>.

Nevertheless, this work is hard and the challenges may seem intractable:

I am sick of talking about diversity and inclusion. . . . If I don't do this work, no one else is going to do this work. It's exhausting in the age of Trayvon Martin. It's exhausting in the age of Eric Garner. . . . It's exhausting that in 2016 librarianship looks the way that it does. . . . And I really would love to just talk about how students learn. . . . But you know I look around our office and no one else is gonna do it.

We're spending all our time trying to prepare [underrepresented people] to succeed in our profession. How about if we prepare ourselves to create inclusive workplaces? Do we know how to do that?

These participants are struggling daily to realize the feminist ideals of "equality and empowerment and equal access," using their power against the intransigent "structures which seem incredibly unwieldy and totally out of our control."

## CONCLUSION

The common thread that weaves through all of our participants' remarks on intersectional feminist leadership in the library profession is the ability to acknowledge one's own power and use it to advance explicitly feminist values that benefit others. To claim one's power and influence is not necessarily easy; it requires self-knowledge and honesty about where that power originates, be it from organizational position, or the privileges of race, gender, class, or any other demographic criteria overvalued in our culture. As one participant acknowledged, "Maybe I need to do more work to own the power that I do have to shape what happens at my organization." You can't share your power unless you accept that you have it in the first place.

This study intended to demonstrate what feminist leadership looks like in the library profession, but it barely scratches the surface. More critical work remains to be done to bring a feminist perspective to the everyday work of librarianship. We would love to see this survey methodology extended to include other questions and other participants with different life experiences and perspectives. Research is needed on the ways power is distributed, both formally and informally, in libraries, as well as the ways the profession relies on

and benefits from structural racism in our society. We would greatly benefit from studies that evaluate and describe effective models for feminist leadership. And we'd be grateful for more feminist analyses of the biases in the structures and systems that underlie our profession. Truth be told, almost everything in librarianship would benefit from more intersectional feminist analysis.

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