

**Danielle Allard**

**School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada**

**Tami Oliphant**

**School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada**

**Thane Chambers**

**University of Alberta Libraries, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada**

## ON OUR OWN TERMS: TOWARDS A CRITICAL INTERSECTIONAL 'FEMILIST' MOVEMENT (Paper)

### **Abstract or Résumé:**

This paper reports on a systematic literature review of CAIS/ACSI and ASIS&T conference proceedings in order to identify, analyze, and map the presence and application of feminist theories, methods, and epistemologies across a sample of LIS research projects. We seek a better understanding of the application of feminist theories to LIS in order to a) identify how/where it has been taken up (and not taken up); b) identify feminist research themes and influence over time and across sub-domains; and perhaps most importantly, c) to consider how we might build on intersectional feminist theories and praxis in LIS in order to move toward a critical intersectional femiLIST movement that is embraced and embedded within our field.

### **1. Introduction**

Feminist theories and methods are a rich and diverse set of critical theories that have been taken up across many disciplines (Bromley, 2012). Although librarianship is a feminized profession, the application of feminist theories within librarianship and across all aspects of Library and Information Studies (LIS) is largely absent. This paper reports on a pilot study of a systematic literature review of Canadian Association of Information Science/ l'Association canadienne des sciences de l'information (CAIS/ACSI) Conference Proceedings and the Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) Conference Proceedings in order to identify, analyze, and map the presence and application of feminist theories, methods, and epistemologies across LIS sub-domains. We seek a better understanding of the application of feminist theories to LIS in order to a) identify how/where it has been taken up (and not taken up); b) identify feminist research themes and influence over time and across sub-domains; and perhaps most importantly, c) to consider how we might build on intersectional feminist theories and praxis in LIS to address important LIS topics, including but not limited to, the feminization of library labour, knowledge organization, and data and Internet studies. Taking the feminist stance ourselves that our work is never value neutral and should always strive for justice and social liberation, we conclude by making recommendations both a) to further develop this research project to understand the past

and future of intersectional transfeminism(s) in LIS, and b) to move towards a critical intersectional femiLIST movement that is embraced and embedded within our field. We do this work here to take up the CAIS/ACSI 2022 Call for Proposals to consider the field of LIS critically and historically.

## **2. Background**

Library and Information Studies is an interdisciplinary field of study that regularly engages with theories and frameworks from other disciplines. bell hooks defines feminism as “the movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression” (hooks, 2000, p. 33)”. Extending beyond this, many feminisms offer a framework to examine intersecting racialized, colonial, ableist, heteropatriarchal, and transphobic systems of oppression. Within Canadian LIS, some important contributions have been made applying feminist theories; for example, Roma Harris examined the feminization of librarianship (1992) and Hope Olson applied feminist theories to explore classification systems (2008; Olson & Ward, 2013). More recently, feminist theories have been used to examine library instruction (Accardi, 2017), Google algorithms (Noble, 2013), community archives (Lobo, 2019), and data (Cifor et al., 2019; D’Ignazio & Klein, 2020). Despite these, and other important contributions and initiatives, we are concerned that the LIS field has largely overlooked feminist theories, methods, and epistemologies.

## **3. Method**

The purpose of this pilot study is both to formulate a methodology for identifying and exploring the presence of feminist theories and methods in LIS publications and to generate a broad understanding of their application across the field. Using broad keyword searching, we searched the Canadian Association of Information Science/ l’Association canadienne des sciences de l’information (CAIS/ACSI) Conference Proceedings (1993-2021) and the Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) Proceedings (2000-2021). We limited our search to these two conference proceedings because conferences are a site where experimental, innovative, and works in progress are often presented across sub-domains. We also acknowledge that not all LIS sub-domains are equally represented by these conference proceedings. Indeed, domain areas such as information behaviour are well represented but archival science, for example, is not. Once duplicate records were removed, in total, 87 citations were identified that contained our query terms. No date restrictions were used.

### **Table 1. Query terms and results**

<b>ASIS&amp;T Proceedings -</b>			
<b>Query</b>	<b>Fields</b>	<b># of results</b>	<b>Date of search</b>
"feminism"	title, keywords, abstract	15	31 December 2021
"intersectionality"	title, keywords, abstract	8	31 December 2021
"feminists"	title, keywords, abstract	2	31 December 2021
"feminist"	title, keywords, abstract	34	31 December 2021
"women's rights"	title, keywords, abstract	1	31 December 2021
	SUB-TOTAL	60	
	DUPLICATES	11	
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>49</b>	

<b>CAIS/ACSI Conference Proceedings -</b>		
<b>Query</b>	<b># of results</b>	<b>Date of search</b>
(feminism OR feminist OR intersectionality OR "women's rights") site:https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/ojs.cais-acsi.ca/index.php	44	31 December 2021
f�eminisme site:https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/ojs.cais-acsi.ca/index.php	0	12 January 2021
SUB-TOTAL	44	
DUPLICATES	6	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>38</b>	

The records consisted of extended abstracts, panel submissions, short papers, and long papers. The data for all 87 records was downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet. Studies were eligible for inclusion in this review if they met the following strict criterion:

- The study authors explicitly named and drew from feminist theories, epistemologies, or methodologies.

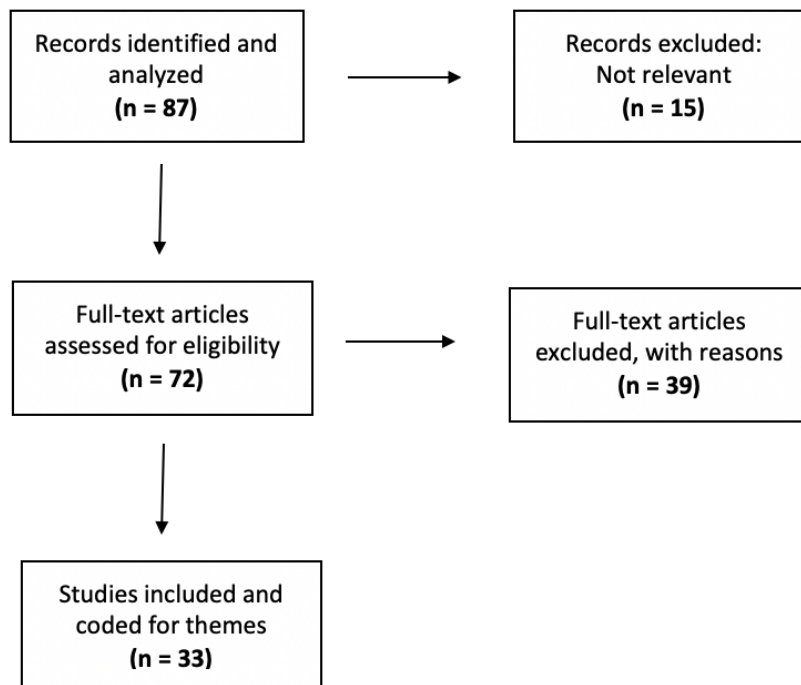
Our exclusion criteria were also strict. Studies were excluded when:

- The focus of the study was on gender rather than advancing feminist theory (e.g. proceedings that described the information behavior of teenage girls but did not use feminist theory or analysis).

- The focus of the study was a site for feminist research (e.g. Women’s Studies listserv), the researcher identified as a feminist, or feminist work was cited, but the study did not itself explicitly apply feminist theory or methods.
- The focus of the study related to feminism, such as decolonization and queer theory, but wasn’t explicitly positioned as feminist. This work uses critical theory, is often connected to feminism or is itself feminist, but was excluded when such connections were not explicitly stated.

We followed this strict inclusion and exclusion criterion to highlight the work of scholars who are using feminist approaches explicitly and self-consciously, rather than indirectly, to serve as an example and potential model for others interested in this research area, and to demonstrate how such theories and methods are taken up across the sub-domains of LIS represented within the conference proceedings.

**Figure 1. Number of articles that fit our inclusion/exclusion criteria**



In total, we fully analyzed and coded 33 conference proceedings. These were coded according to the feminist epistemologies, methodologies, or theories identified by the author, the subject domains of the work presented (e.g. knowledge organization, LIS history, archives), year of publication, and additional themes identified by coders. Coding was done independently by two members of the research team and then discussed to reach consensus on inclusion and exclusion criteria and coding.

#### **4. Findings and discussion**

Nineteen of the 33 fully analyzed publications came from ASIST conference proceedings and 14 came from CAIS. Table 2. shows the number of publications included in the study by subject domain.

**Table 2. Number of publications using feminist theory, methodology, and epistemology and subject domain**

Subject Domain	Number of Publications
Archives	4
Data studies/policy/data management	4
Information behaviour/practices/reading	7
Internet Studies/STS/digital libraries	5
Knowledge organization	4
LIS theory, history, community, origins, intellectual freedom	5
Library labour	3
Methods/methodology	1
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>33</b>

These findings indicate that feminist theories and methods are infrequently being used across a wide range of sub-domains in LIS. We also noted that there has been more substantive uptake of feminism(s) in LIS particularly in recent ASIST conferences.

The smallness of our final dataset confirms that feminist theories have not been substantively taken up at CAIS and ASIS&T conferences. That said, we have identified several themes that cut across all disciplinary sub-domains and represent key elements of feminist thought. Several of these themes are briefly elaborated below.

*Privileging perspectives of marginalized knowers particularly about issues of gender equity*

Feminist thought centres the experiences, knowledges, voices, and stories of marginalized knowers. Several articles highlight this by focusing on traditionally gendered issues such as the home (Doty, 2020) and caregiving (Dalmer & McKenzie, 2019). Other articles generate and apply feminist epistemological frameworks and methods such as epistemic injustice (Patin et al, 2020), a “black feminist epistemic lens” (Patin et al, 2021), and institutional ethnography (Dalmer, 2018). More broadly, numerous articles acknowledge the need for a more concentrated focus within their study area on the information experiences of equity-deserving communities.

*Rejection of neutrality*

Taking up a critical perspective that rejects neutrality, several articles explore how technology (Sweeney & Brock, 2014), data (Burns et al, 2018), and classification systems (Olson & Ward, 2013) are gendered and raced. Such perspectives strive to make visible the often-hidden relationship between power and gendered and racialized systems and institutions. This

perspective was most prominently located in the sub-domains of data studies, Internet studies, and knowledge organization.

### *Ethics of care*

A framework for privileging the development of empathetic and caring relations in professional practices, a feminist ethics of care framework was applied in the areas of library and archival labour and pedagogy (Ghaddar, Allard, & Hubbard, 2016; Poole & Zhang, 2021). Relatedly, emotional labour and the feminization of librarianship were also discussed as the negative flipside of this concept, acknowledging that because library work is gendered as feminine, it is consequently devalued (Lieu, Allard, & Oliphant, 2019).

### *Liberatory goals*

Feminist praxis - putting theory into action - is a critical dimension of feminist work. Indeed, “feminism is both a theory and a movement to bring about social change based on that theory. Feminist politics demand a transformation of the existing systems of power, which are complicated by debates about what it means to end oppression and exploitation” (Bromley, 2012). This orientation towards liberatory social change was often explicitly stated as part of articles’ project goals. For example, objectives include “data justice” (Burns et al., 2018), “to ameliorate marginalized knowledge domains” (Olson & Ward, 2013), “to support queer readers’ identities” (Rothbauer, 2013), and “to oppose sexual harassment” (Lieu, Allard, & Oliphant, 2019).

### *Feminisms and critical theories*

There are many feminisms. Indeed, the nature of some feminisms have shifted over time, embracing important critiques by people of colour that feminisms have not spoken for them or addressed the specific conditions of their lives. Intersectionality offers a framework to examine interlocking racialized, colonial, ableist, and heteropatriarchal systems of oppression (Combahee River Collective, 1977). In our findings, feminist theories were also often used in conjunction with other critical theories, such as decolonization, critical race, and queer theory, to apply an intersectional lens to research topics. For example, approaches included “black feminism” (Gray, 2020), “feminist and Indigenous data practices” (Rayburn, 2021), and “critiques from feminist, queer, critical race, and social theory” (Burns et al., 2018). More research is needed to understand the relationships between feminisms and critical theories, including how these frameworks are distinct from each other, related, overlapping, complimentary, and often intersectional.

Taken together, these themes represent common aspects and discussions within feminist thought and point towards a shared application of some feminist theories and methods in LIS. Because we have only examined 2 sets of conference proceedings our dataset is limited and has significant gaps; nonetheless, this pilot study points to a dearth of relevant findings and reveals major gaps in the application of specific feminisms to LIS. For example, black feminisms, decolonizing feminisms, queer feminisms, transfeminisms, transnational feminisms, and Arab feminisms are nearly or entirely absent from the proceedings. That said, feminist theories identified in proceedings published more recently more frequently applied feminisms intersectionally and in conjunction with other critical theories. More research is needed to nuance

our early understanding and to consider how intersectional feminist theories and methods can and should be taken up more fully in the LIS field.

## 5. Conclusions and next steps

We conclude by making some recommendations for moving forward with this research project and with the express intention of building a critical intersectional femiLISt movement. First, we need to examine a bigger sample of LIS publications, both academic and practitioner, to better understand our past and current publishing practices and feminist activities and commitments. Understanding and tracing our own histories allows us to envision the future. We also need to connect and map feminist theories and methods to other liberatory and critical frameworks in LIS to better understand how they intersect, promote, and work alongside each other as well as disagree. Lastly, we need to identify and build coalitions between domain experts and the many feminists within the LIS field.

In this spirit we offer some suggestions that we might collectively take to immediately promote femiLISm(s) when creating conference proceedings and other publications. We can, for example, raise the profile of feminist theories and methods in LIS by explicitly naming them in our conference abstracts, publication titles, and keywords. We can also normalize identifying social justice goals in our publications to make clear the links between feminist praxis and our research projects. Lastly, we can build intersectional feminist networks by attending each other's presentations and actively seeking out and committing to citing the work of feminists and other critical theorists.

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